

A
Kind of
Beauty
and the
Beast
Story

Part I

By C.J. Young

A Kind of Beauty and the Beast Story

Part 1

**By C.J. Young
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Chapter 01- A Kind of Beauty

Lila stopped dead in her tracks and read the sign again. Then she smiled, a surge of excitement flowing through her.

It was a beautiful day in her home town Mirth, a small village just east of the Lana River. The farmers could be heard selling in the market, as well as the herds of cows, pigs, and sheep in the fields nearby. Out here in the countryside such sights and sounds were common place. But as of today there was something new happening in the village square. A royal contractor from the castle had come, and he was offering people the job of a lifetime.

Lila walked passed the sign and approached the elegant stall hesitantly. She saw a man inside sitting next to a tall stack of papers, while another man stood outside shouting to those passing by. She took a moment to listen to his announcement carefully.

"We are seeking the most skilled men and women in all the land to come and serve in the royal castle. Come and serve His Highness!" He kept repeating loudly.

Lila smiled once more. So it was just as she thought! These men were offering a good paying job to anyone interested, male or female, young or old! This was just what she needed.

Lila took a deep breath and slowly walked up to man inside the booth. He was busy writing something down on a large scroll.

"Hello good Sir!" She said quietly.

The man stopped what he was doing and looked up to face her. His skin was very pale and his eyes had dark bags under them, as if he had not been

in the sun or even slept in years. But he gave a friendly smile and tipped his hat to her.

"Oh hello! Have you come to accept a contract?" He asked.

"Yes I have." She replied.

The man nodded. "Very good milady!"

He then grabbed a paper from off of the tall pile next to him and handed it to her.

"Just sign your name here." He said, showing her the fancy dotted line.

Lila took the paper and signed it with her best writing. Then she held it up with pride and smiled. This was just so amazing! She could not have imagined a better opportunity than this even if she had tried!

She gave the paper back to the man. He rolled it up, tied it with a ribbon, and placed in a new pile of similar scrolls.

"The carriage will pick you up along with the others at sunrise. When you arrive you will receive back the contract, and when you reach the castle you will present it to the administrators there." He instructed.

"Thank you Sir!" Lila said with growing excitement.

The man smiled and tipped his hat again. "Not a problem lass! Good-day to you."

"Good-day to you as well!" She said.

Then she turned and headed back home. She was so eager to tell her father the great news that she ran the whole way there. The sun setting in the distance cast an orange hue along the road surrounding her, causing even the fields nearby to glow in its light. Lila admired the lovely view as she crossed over the little creek leading to her family's farm. Once she reached the house she burst through the door and ran straight up to her father's room. There she found him in his bed, just the way she had left him that morning. He smiled when she entered and beckoned her over to him.

"Hello my dear! How was your day?" He asked in a weak voice.

Lila ran right into his arms and squeezed him tightly.

"Excellent Papa! I have good news to tell you!" She exclaimed.

His eyes lit up with surprise. "Oh really? What is it?"

Lila proceeded to explain the day's events to him as quickly as she could, unable to control her excitement as she did so. But when she mentioned the part about accepting the contract to work in the castle, her father's face suddenly went pale.

"No! You cannot agree to this job my dear it is far too dangerous!" He said with alarm.

"But I have to father! You know we need the money." She said stubbornly.

"My dear, there must be another way other than this..." He replied, looking very anxious.

"I have already signed the contract, and I will be leaving tomorrow morning." Lila said with her arms crossed.

Her father just sat there in his bed looking helpless.

"But it would be better for you to stay here and work, even though it affords less pay." He argued.

"Father nothing around here can pay near enough! I have looked high and low already." She replied persistently.

Her father groaned and closed his eyes. "My child, why do you cause me such distress?"

Lila blushed with embarrassment. For a split second doubt crawled into her mind. Was she truly being foolish right now? It was possible she supposed. But it didn't really matter what the risks were, because this was the way it just had to be now. They both knew it deep down.

"I do not care what the rumors say Papa, I am not afraid to work in the royal palace." She said.

Her father shook his head. "But I have heard many things from the neighbors and they have family who already work there. These are not mere rumors we hear!"

Lila crossed her arms again stubbornly.

"I shall do my utmost to avoid trouble then. I am sure my stay there will be quite uneventful, and that there is nothing at all to be worried about." She said.

He shook his head and rubbed his forehead.

"Remember father," Lila began, always getting emotional whenever she had to mention this. "Your illness is not getting any better. I fear that if I do not earn some money for the medicine you need then you will never be able to recover! Besides, our debts are getting larger by the day and you know we cannot borrow any more money."

Her father sighed deeply. "So this is all *my* fault then?"

Lila came over and sat on the edge of his bed and put her hand in his. He would not look her in the eyes as he squeezed it back. Her father was such a tall and strong man, and to see him so sick and frail was absolutely heartbreaking for Lila. He tried to hide his true concerns about it, but his dark eyes betrayed his thoughts much like her own often did. Both of them knew full well his condition was serious and that he might not be able to recover on his own. He might even get worse if things continued this same way.

"Papa I am twenty-two, plenty old enough to make my own choices! And you know you do not need to worry, I can take good care of myself." Lila said gently.

Her father shook his head and looked away. She gently leaned in and hugged him again.

"I will send back the money for your medicine and return as soon as I have earned enough to pay for it all." She promised.

Her father squeezed her back and rested his head on hers.

"I guess it is too late for me to stop you. But please; be careful my dear! I could not live if I lost you." He said quietly.

Lila nodded. "Of course I will father."

"You know I will miss you everyday, and worry greatly for your safety until you return." Her father said, obviously still trying to guilt her into staying.

Lila rolled her eyes. "I will be okay Papa! *Nothing* is going to happen."

He grumbled. "Well I suppose I have no choice but to *hope* such an outcome takes place here from my bed."

Lila sighed. She knew he feared for her safety, and for good reason. But she preferred not to worry, else her conviction might falter. Instead, Lila focused on the prospects of working in the royal castle. She had never even been beyond the boundaries of Mirth's small countryside, so this grand job opportunity was truly beyond anything she could have ever imagined. It was almost a little exciting in a way!

Of course this opportunity did come with a price, the very aspect that her father feared; the King of the castle himself. Everyone in the whole kingdom knew the young man was unstable, cruel, and unpredictable. He had a reputation for punishing people over any little thing and tossing his own servants into the dungeon. But Lila wasn't in the least bit afraid of the castle or its rumored dangers. Rarely anything scared her more than the thought of losing her father to his illness. Ever since her mother had passed away when she was a young girl there had always been just the two of

them. Their days on the farm were often long and strenuous, with many hardships and toils to deal with. But the two of them also enjoyed many laughs and joys throughout her life, with every memory being precious to Lila.

However, when her father fell ill just last year he had become too weak to handle even the easiest of tasks around the farm. But the medicine her father needed was very expensive, so Lila had no choice but to borrow the money for it. For a while his symptoms seemed to improve with its help, but when they could no longer borrow the funds necessary to buy anymore his illness returned. Now they were in deeply indebted, hardly having enough food to eat some days. So like Lila had told her father earlier; there was nothing else for her to do *but* accept this well-paying job.

That night Lila's father helped her pack a travel bag with anything she could need. Some food for the trip, a clean change of clothes, and some favorite keep sakes to remind her of home. He also insisted that she take what little money they had left in case she decided to return. She accepted it, but only to appease him.

Maryann, their good neighbor, agreed to watch over her father and provide anything he needed in Lila's absence. She was a very kind woman, and had always been there to help their family in times of need in any way she could. She also seemed to care especially for her father, although he never seemed to realize it. For Lila though, she was the closest thing she knew to having a mother. She was so grateful for all the kindness Maryann had shown over the years, and most especially now.

Lila lay awake in bed that night thinking of the day ahead. She wondered what the castle would look like, or how a simple country girl like her was going to fare in a lavish castle. Surely it must be a very big place with lots of people. Would she even be able to fit in? Would she be able to handle the

job assigned her and earn enough to pay off their debts and buy her father's medicine? She had no idea really, but she supposed that worrying would do little good in the end. So she closed her eyes and eventually let herself fall asleep.

The next morning Lila rose early, before the sun even came up, and started getting ready. Her father even insisted on leaving his bed and coming to the door to see her off. Maryann soon joined them, bringing with her a small wrapped gift.

"Thank you Maryann. I do not know what we would do without you right now." Lila said honestly.

The woman smiled and gave her a hug.

"I only wish I had been able to loan you the money." She said sadly.

Lila smiled. "You both need not worry yourselves, I am going to be just fine!"

"Just be careful dear Lila. Leo here will never forgive you if you should get into trouble." She said with concern.

Lila nodded. "I will be back before either of you can even miss me!"

Her father grunted and folded his arms with aggravation. Lila just smiled and gave him another big hug and kiss.

"Take care of yourself as well father, so that your illness will fade and I can return to you sooner." She said.

He sighed and wrapped his arms around her tightly, almost taking her breath away with his embrace.

"I love you very much my dear." He said quietly.

Lila had to fight back tears her tears in order to avoid worrying him any more than she already was.

"I love you too father." She said quietly.

"My dear you will miss the carriage if you do not hurry!" Maryann said gently.

Lila gave them both one last hug and then quickly made her way towards the village station. She ran in the gloom of the early morning, and her father watched from the door until she could no longer be seen. It was only after he was no longer in her sight that she let a few tears finally fall.

Lila reached the station just as the sun was starting to shine bright orange. Many people stood there already waiting, probably lured by the same prospect as her. Usually simple country folk were not sought out to work for the royal family, but since the King was especially frightful it seemed it was not easy to find workers among areas where better opportunities existed.

Lila looked among the crowd to see if she could spot any familiar faces. She felt a little relieved when she did not, happy that none of her neighbors were in the same dire situation as her family. But just as Lila was looking over the people again she caught sight of the most beautiful girl she had ever seen, and surely the most beautiful girl in the whole entire world! She had a heart shaped face, bright blonde hair, big violet eyes, and perfectly tanned skin. Lila suddenly felt a bit self-conscious. She often became this way when standing near such pretty girls because her own looks were quite plain in comparison. Her hair was red and wild, her eyes were an unimpressive grey color, and her skin was covered with freckles and constantly sun burned. Indeed, Lila was not a beauty by anyone's standards. Except for her father of course, who often said she perfectly reflected the features of her late mother.

A man soon approached their group and blew a horn to get everyone's attention. Lila watched as another man stood up on a stool in front of them. He started calling out people to step forward and present themselves. When

each person walked up he gave them their contract, which they needed in order to work at the castle, and he then directed them to a coach. When one carriage was full he sent it off and started loading another.

Eventually Lila heard her name called. She walked up and saw that those standing around looked quite frightened still. So when she reached the man she took the contract from him fearlessly. The man smiled at her with admiration and directed her to a seat. Five more people were crammed inside the small coach before it was sent off. But much to Lila's dismay, the most beautiful girl in the world happened to be sitting right across from her in the carriage.

She sighed quietly. So much for avoiding the inevitable comparison between the two of them! She did not like being judged by others. Perhaps though she could try to pass the time and avoid any stares by focusing on the scenery outside.

Hours creped by quietly as the carriage slowly made its way through the countryside. No one spoke a single word because of their nervousness, but Lila was busy admiring the beautiful farms, hills, and creeks that were passing them by. Gam was often praised for its fertile land and lush fields, with no other Kingdom even coming close in comparison with its wealth and prosperity. It was little wonder the Kingdom and royal family flourished so greatly in the span of just two hundred years! Lila for her part favored the views Gam afforded more than anything else. It was early summer so the flowers were in bloom, the birds were singing, with a wide variety of lovely butterflies flying around. A perfect way to start the season!

Lila tried to keep track of how far they were raveling as the carriage passed one familiar landmark after another. When they finally crossed over the Lana river, she was as far away from home as she had ever been before. For a brief moment Lila felt quite anxious about going so far from home,

but then excitement overcame her fears. This journey was truly a once in a lifetime experience for a country bumpkin like her! She would do her best to make sure she enjoyed it to the full before returning. Hopefully it would turn out to be a grand experience indeed.

After a while some of the passengers fell asleep, everyone else occupied themselves with a book or continued staring out the window. Lila for her part was forced to pull herself away from the view outside by the sound of her own growling stomach. She had not eaten anything breakfast that morning and felt absolutely famished now! So she rummaged through her bag, which she had been holding on her lap to keep from any potential pocket pickers, until she found the small package Maryann had packed for her. It was soft, and smelled almost like fresh baked bread. She might have been imagining it, but then again perhaps she was not.

Lila quickly unwrapped the gift and much to her relief found a loaf of nut bread, her very favorite kind of bread, gently cradled in the napkin and nearly still warm to the touch! Maryann had obviously baked it late last night just so she could eat it that morning.

Lila smiled. Truly, no one could deny that woman's love for her family. She would be sure to discuss these facts with her father when she returned home. Perhaps one day he too could come to think of her as more than a close friend.

Lila tore off a small piece of the loaf and began eating it. But as she enjoyed the first bit of her food, she suddenly noticed someone staring at her from the corner of her eye. Lila looked up, and was surprised to see the most beautiful girl in the world looking her way. However, she quickly realized that the girl was staring not at her, but at the piece of bread in her hand. As soon as their eyes met though the girl immediately turned away with embarrassment and started gazing out the window. It was then that Lila

also noticed the girl did not seem to have a travel bag of any sort, nor an overcoat, or anything at all with her for the trip. Lila immediately felt bad for her, so she torn the remainder of her loaf in half and held one of the pieces to the girl.

"Here." She said with a friendly smile.

The girl looked at her with astonishment. But then she nodded with very grateful eyes and carefully took the bread.

"T-Thank you." She said with a soft and pleasant voice.

"You are very welcome." Lila replied, wondering how her own voice sounded in comparison.

The girl blushed like a delicate pink rose and quickly began eating. Her face could hardly hide how happy the little bit of food made her. After a moment she finished the bread and looked back to Lila with a small smile.

"Thank you again. You are very kind." She said.

"No need to thank me. I got it as a gift myself." Lila replied.

The girl shook her head sadly. "I truly wish I could be as at ease as you seem to be right now! I do not want to take this job right now, but I had to in order to provide for my brothers and sisters. Since the death of my mother and then my father it has been hard to make ends meet back home."

Lila hadn't asked for her whole life story, but it was obvious that this girl was nervous and maybe in need of someone to talk to.

"I am sorry to hear that. But you should not worry too much; I am quite sure it will all work out well. The King may have a harsh reputation, but you cannot believe every rumor you hear about someone. No one is quite as bad as others say." Lila reassured.

The girl was surprised by her words and looked at her curiously for a moment. Then she smiled.

"That is encouraging to hear. I am glad you are so confident. I guess I was very fortunate in sitting next to you today!" She said quietly.

Lila blushed. "Thank you. It was nice to meet you as well. My name is Lila."

The girl smiled happily. "I am Daphne. I really hope we can work together at the castle! Maybe we can even eat together too!"

Lila nodded with a bit of surprise. "Indeed, that would be nice."

"Alright, it is a plan then." She replied happily.

Then it was quiet again, and both of them went back to staring out the window for a while. Lila wondered why a girl like her was here for work when she was beautiful enough to marry a rich man. That might seem like shallow thinking to some, but if your good looks so happened to increase your odds of making a good marriage and living a comfortable life, then Lila really didn't see anything wrong with it. Perhaps though it was hard for Daphne because of her siblings. She seemed dedicated to caring for them, and it is not every man who would want to take on such a large responsibility all at once.

It didn't take long before Lila fell asleep too, lured into such a peaceful state by the harmonious rhythm of the horse hooves beating against the ground. Their carriage rode like this for five days, stopping only twice a day to rest and change coachmen. A small loaf of bread was provided for them each day, which just barely enough to keep the hunger at bay. On the third day however, the castle's shadow became visible in the distance, and on the fourth day they finally arrived.

Chapter 02- A Kind of Beast

Westan grumbled and opened his eyes slowly. Was it morning already?

Another loud knock came at the door. He grumbled again and put a pillow over his face, resolved to ignore the disturbance. He did not want to get up yet.

But another knock came, then another, and another. Westan yawned with irritation and looked towards his window once more. By the look of the rays of sunlight leaking through his curtains it was nearly noon actually.

"My King, Zacchaeus has sent me to fetch you right away!" The servant outside his door said loudly.

Westan sighed. Why did he have to be bothered so early? Could whatever it was not wait a little longer? He was not ready to get up just yet!

"What does he want?" He snapped.

"Your new tutors have arrived sire! He wishes your studies with them to start immediately!" The man outside replied.

Westan groaned. New tutors? Why did Zacchaeus always insist on trying to make him waste the day away studying? He hated such tiresome work! He much preferred to spend his days outside in the sun ridding his horses or practicing his swordplay. But he would not get out of these duties today it seemed. No matter, this new teacher would not last any longer than those before him had.

"Very well, come in." Westan grumbled miserably, too tired to expend any more energy resisting.

At his word several of his servants immediately entered his room. They started opening his drapes, preparing his bath, and laying out his royal garments. Westan took his sweet time getting ready though, hoping to stall

the day as long as possible. Eventually he finished getting dressed and finally put on his father's old crown before looking in the mirror at his appearance.

Westan sighed. He was almost nineteen now, and with each passing year he resembled his father more and more. He even had his same black hair and brown eyes, although the face shape resembled his mother more. It had been almost nine years since his parents' assassination, but it still felt as though they died just yesterday. He missed them both terribly, especially on loathsome days like today.

Westan often remembered when he was young, how he had spent most of his time at the castle's nursery so that the King and Queen could focus on their royal duties. But still, they each had made time to see him every day without fail. This was a very unusual custom, especially for a powerful and busy King. His father had even allowed him to join them for supper and special occasions when Westan was only eight years old, although most nobles only let their children come to supper or be seen at court after about sixteen years of age! His father never feared breaking such traditions when it came to him, and Westan had always been touched by that. How he wished they were still here with him instead of these useless servants he had to deal with every day!

After a moment a servant came and stood before Westan with a bow.

"My Lord, Zacchaeus instructed me to say that he wants you to behave yourself." He said nervously.

Westan just scoffed. "*If I* like this man, then perhaps I will act properly. And you can tell that to Zacchaeus!"

He did not like being bossed around by his council man Zacchaeus, especially with regards to new tutors and any bore some duties! But still, Westan often tried not to be *too* difficult towards him, because he knew the

man truly only had his best interests at heart. Zacchaeus had in fact been the only one there to protect him when his parents were attacked, and nowadays he was almost like an uncle to him. For these reasons Westan put up with his constant rules and regulations, even when it was not easy.

Once dressed and properly groomed Westan finally felt ready to leave. The servants all bowed and exited the room before him, followed by the messenger.

"Come this way my King! I shall take you to the library where they are awaiting your greeting." The escort stated.

Westan just sighed and followed reluctantly. As he left the room four royal guards also accompanied behind him, as they always did. He could never be anywhere in the castle without them now, except for his private chambers which barely gave him a small measure of privacy. When Westan was younger he often gave his men the slip and ran off to one of his favorite hiding spots to escape his schooling or the doctor's medicine. But now that he was older it wasn't as easy. He barely got to have any fun anymore it seemed!

Westan watched the birds singing outside through the hallway windows as he walked. The breeze looked gentle and the sky had no clouds in sight for miles. What a shame he was going to spend the day away it in the dark and dusty library of all places!

Westan grumbled. His foul mood was not improving in the least bit with such lovely weather outside. It was the beginning of summer, and he was not about to spend it all cooped up in the castle! Whoever this new teacher was would be a wise man indeed if he just took his leave as soon as possible. Westan did not care what it took; he would get his freedom back before the week was up!

Eventually the messenger brought him to the library. They entered and walked towards the back where the royal family's personal study was located. Westan entered the private room and went over to sit in his large chair, which resided at the end of a large round table that was covered from one end to the other with big, old, dusty books.

Westan sat down and sighed with defeat. How he hated working in here, especially on his reading and writing skills! He had never been any good at either, even when he was little boy. It seemed to be such a useless pursuit now that he was older since Zacchaeus easily got things done without him well enough. Why did he even have to keep bothering with these lessons anymore? It wasn't like he would ever be able to master them!

Westan gazed around the room for his new teacher, but was surprised to see was only the messenger and his guards standing nearby.

"Where is the teacher?" He snapped impatiently.

The messenger came forward and bowed. "I will go and fetch him right away."

"Next time have him here *first*! I do not like waiting!" Westan shouted angrily.

"Yes of course my Lord! My deepest apologies!" The man replied nervously.

Then the servant left and returned after a few moments with not one, but *two* men. The first was a tall and wide man with blonde hair and blue eyes, and the second was a young man who perfectly reflected the features of the first, aside from being thinner and slightly taller. He seemed to be the man's son, and he looked to be near Westan's own age. They both wore a silk shirt, brown pants, and a green vest with gold details. It appeared they were *both* going to be his tutors.

"What is the meaning of this?" Westan demanded, gesturing towards the boy.

The father tutor quickly stepped forward and gave a deep bow.

"Greetings my King! This is my son Bartholomew, my assistant. I am Mr. Jameson, and we are both very honored to meet you!" He said nervously.

The boy bowed as well, looking up at him with a nervous but cheerful smile.

Westan frowned. He was not amused at all by this development.

"You dare bring someone so young to act as one of my instructors? Do you mean to insult me?" He snapped.

Honestly, Westan did not wish to be taught by a peasant who barely looked older than twenty-five! In fact, nothing could be more humiliating in his mind.

Mr. Jameson stood frozen for a moment, unsure of what to say. But Bartholomew bowed and spoke up quickly.

"My Lord, I offer my sincerest apologies! We meant no insult; for I am but an assistant! Certainly I would be honored to be of any help to both your Majesty and my father!" He said.

Westan scoffed. "Do not act like you two are grateful to be here! I know very well you could not refuse being summoned by Zacchaeus's royal decree!"

Both of the men could not help but glance towards the guards stationed in the room with them. They knew just as well as the rest of them that they were both completely at his mercy here.

The messenger from earlier also came before him with a bow.

"What!?" Westan snapped, fully fed up with everyone already.

"Zacchaeus says he will inquire from Mr. Jameson how your studies progress." He said nervously.

Westan frowned and shooed him away. Then he looked at the frightened teacher and his 'assistant'.

"Get started already!" He commanded loudly.

Both men bowed and immediately did as they were told. Mr. Jameson quickly laid out books and papers while the boy gave them both quill and ink bottles. Twice the teacher nervously spilled his ink, so his son would quickly clean it up and fetch a new one.

Westan watched them clown around, getting more and more aggravated as the session progressed. He tried to focus on watching the garden through the window for a while, but he constantly found himself distracted by the 'assistant' Bartholomew, who continued to look quite happy no matter how tense the atmosphere was. Westan found himself a bit insulted by his obvious act. But he supposed it presented him with a good opportunity.

"Assistant!" He called out suddenly.

The boy immediately looked up from his task and bowed.

"Y-Yes your Majesty?" He asked nervously.

"I am unsure as to why you are considered an assistant, as your skills displayed thus far truly seem to be lacking." Westan said with a scowl.

The boy blushed and looked down at the ground nervously. For a moment he was unsure how to respond.

"I-I apologize sire. I shall try to perform better." He managed to say.

"Actually, I think you should take off that unfitting vest until you can actually prove yourself worthy of it. I do not like people who try to live above their station." Westan said coldly.

The boy nodded with embarrassment and quickly took off his vest in compliance. Mr. Jameson watched his son's humiliating scene quietly,

looking too afraid to say anything.

"Now hurry up and carry on! I want to get this over with." Westan shouted, hoping to startle them a little.

Both men jumped with surprise at his raised voice and quickly got back to work. Mr. Jameson continued to keep nervously dropping and spilling things, a scene that Westan nearly enjoyed watching. But despite his cold glare and harsh words, the son continued to be as cheery as ever throughout the day, keeping a constant smile on his face as he tried quite earnestly to help his father. He would even laugh a little and try to lighten the mood when his father became flustered.

Westan scowled. Just what was with this boy? Was there no upsetting him!? His plan to scare them away would never work unless he could break the teacher's son as well!

"Assistant!" Westan called out again.

The boy turned reluctantly and bowed once more.

"Y-Yes my Lord?" He said quietly.

"How dare you act this way in my presence!" Westan snapped.

The boy looked up with alarm and confusion.

"W-What have I done to upset you?" He asked.

"I find everything about your manners displayed here today insulting actually." Westan stated.

The boy stared down at his feet with embarrassment. "I-I apologize sire. I meant no-"

"Be silent!" Westan shouted, even standing up from his seat.

The boy and his father froze completely and watched him with fearful eyes.

"You are dismissed from my presence *assistant*, and I do not wish to see your face ever again!" He commanded angrily.

Mr. Jameson's eyes bulged, and the boy looked to be in a state of shock for a moment. But neither dared protest as the one of the guards came and grabbed the boy by the arm, roughly showing him out the door.

Westan then turned to the boy's father with a frown. Mr. Jameson just met his stare with horror.

"Now hurry up and get this study over with already!" Westan growled.

The man bowed with fear and quickly got back to his lesson, spilling or dropping his things every few minutes. Westan smiled with triumph at his teacher's distress and at his own plans success. It was only a matter of time before these men begged Zacchaeus to be set free. Only then could he go back to going about his day without a single care to deal with!

Chapter 03- So the Story Begins

Lila looked out the window and gazed at the castle's tall watchtowers in the distance. They were nearly at the castle now!

"Look!" She said, pointing them out to Daphne.

"Oh my...we are so close." She replied with a frightened gasp.

It had taken almost four days of traveling, but now they were finally at the castle's city. It was quite lively, with many well to do looking people walking about. Dark blue, the color of the royal family, colorfully decorated everything, and could be seen on roof shingles, marketplace tents, water vases, store signs, and most clothing.

Lila immediately became jealous. No one here looked dirty, poor, or even stressed! There were no fields or farms nearby, nor were there any kind of common labor workers seen in the city besides bakers and blacksmiths. The city was more like a marketplace where people brought their goods from various place to sell. Merchants stood at their booths selling tools, furniture, exotic animal and plants, and much more. This world was indeed very different from her own!

None of the passersby seemed to take much note of their carriages coming through, as they were obviously used to it. With the King's reputation they probably had to find new servants weekly! Lila wondered how one man could be so very difficult. Did he not care at all about what his subjects thought of him or how they lived in his presence? Probably not, as he had no reason to think of anyone besides himself she was sure. It truly was a pity, for that must be a very sad and lonely way to live.

Night fell as they reached a large brick wall which had a large metal barred door and two rows of guards standing watch. Each one was clad in

armor and dark blue fabric uniforms adorned with the royal crest, a symbol represented by a gold eagle that had a sword in each claw and three gold roses above its head. Only after they were granted entrance by the door master were the doors opened and each carriage led in. It was then, as they passed through the wall's arches, that Lila saw the true beauty of the castle itself. It stood tall, made with dark blue glazed bricks that shimmered in the torch light, and large gold trimmed windows and doors. It was surely the most exquisite building structure she had ever seen! Nothing could even come close to its beauty in her mind.

Eventually their carriage came to a halt as they reached the back entrance of the castle itself. Soldiers stood there examining those who tried to enter, each armed with a sharp sword on their hip. Lila felt a pang of nervousness as a guard came and opened the door to her carriage. Everyone within froze and seemed unwilling to step out. Lila even thought she saw Daphne tearing up.

She sighed and slowly stood up, exiting their carriage first. As soon as she did her arm was grabbed by the guard outside, while her bag was taken by another man standing off to her side.

"HEY!" She shouted with surprise and alarm.

The man who held her arm ignored her as he began patting her down. The other guard who had taken her bag quickly dumped its contents out on a table and began inspecting them. Lila held back her fears as she realized that this was just a basic procedure and there was no need to panic. Everyone she saw was being inspected just like her, and anyone who did not get out of the carriage willingly was eventually pulled out.

Suddenly, Lila heard a startled scream from beside her. She looked over to see Daphne staring with horror at a guard who had obviously gotten a little *too* friendly when patting her down. The young guard glared at her

angrily for the attention she drew. He probably got away with it often enough.

"May we both go now?" Lila asked her inspector impatiently.

The man grunted, but motioned for the two of them to move along. Daphne immediately came to her side and clung nervously to her arm.

"Do not worry, men will be men." Lila said calmly, hoping to put her at ease.

After getting back her bag, which was no longer neatly organized, they were put in a row along with everyone else. Only after all the carriages were emptied did a nicely dressed man finally come and address them all.

"Good evening everyone! Welcome to the castle! You will be sorted into appropriate groups and given your tasks. I ask that you listen carefully and you do exactly as I say. So first off I need the men move to the right, and women to the left." He said loudly.

Everyone did as instructed. The man took a glance at the groups to make sure they had all obeyed before he continued.

"Very good! Now, young ladies and gentlemen below the age of twenty-five, please step forward." He commanded.

Daphne and Lila, as well as everyone else in that age group did as instructed.

"You ladies will be cleaning maids and you men shall be gardeners. Please follow the servants who come to your group. Now women and men between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five, please step forward." The man instructed.

Just then an older woman came before Lila and her group, and an older man to the boys. They motioned for those in the group to follow them. As their group walked down a hallway off to the left, the men's group went

down the hallway to the right. Lila could still hear the echo of the man in charge as he assigned the next group.

"You women are to be cooks, and you men are to be butlers. Please follow the servants who come to your groups. Now women and men between the ages of forty-five and fifty-five, please step forward." He said.

Lila heard no more after that because the echo became too faded. She felt a bit disappointed by the man's pick though, as she would really have preferred a job such as a gardener since she was used to such work by trade already. But at least now Daphne and she would indeed be working together it seemed.

The older woman leading their group eventually stopped at a large hallway full of doors. She turned back to face them with harsh eyes and a raspy voice.

"These are your sleeping quarters ladies. These will be your rooms permanently for your stay here. Tomorrow morning I will be giving out your uniforms and assignments. Every day you will receive a breakfast, lunch, and supper at the proper times. No one is permitted in the kitchens past the times allowed. Now, get in a single file line." She shouted.

Everyone did as they were told, and the woman began separating them by groups of twenty-four for the bedrooms. Once the woman finished grouping them all she put them in their assigned rooms for the night. Lila saw that Daphne had been put in her same group too, which was a bit of a relief. She had to admit that it was nice having someone here that she was already aquatinted with.

The maid soon led them into a very small room, their new sleeping quarters. Inside there were twelve small bunk beds for them to share, one glass window at the end of the room that probably let in a decent amount of light during the day and a small amount of moonlight at night, and a small

table for them to share for various activities. But there was no fireplace to keep them warm, nor a curtain over the window, and not much room at all to move around the cramped space. Indeed, it was not in the least bit cozy. But she supposed it would have to do, and it was at least it was better than sleeping under her own roof, which would leak and let in a cold breeze from time to time.

Lila saw all the girls scrambling for the beds furthest from the door, so she waited until all but the last two near the entrance were taken. Daphne happily shared the bunk that was left with her, and together they started laying out the blankets allotted to them.

Since it was late it seemed they would have to wait until the next morning to eat. Hopefully breakfast the next morning would be warm and filling, perhaps consisting of oatmeal with fruit or cinnamon, since she had only eaten a small amount of bread earlier that day. Lila licked her lips and felt her stomach growl at such thoughts. She tried to avoid such daydreaming as she changed out of her clothes, not wanting to make herself feel any hungrier.

Once settled in their nightgowns, Lila climbed into bed ready for some restful sleep. Tomorrow would be a big day, and she did not want to feel tired or sluggish. But after a moment she noticed that all the girls were gathering around the lamp to talk.

"I feel bad for the men picked to work out in the garden. You know I heard the King punishes people more severely out there." One girl said with crossed arms.

"Indeed, because he spends so much time out there and does not like to see servants when he is relaxing." Another girl added.

"I heard that he ruthlessly executed most of the servants in the castle after the death of his parents. Apparently he was not happy with them, even

though they had cared for him all his life." Still another said.

"Oh my!" Daphne whispered with fear.

Lila just rolled her eyes. Honestly, there was so much ridiculousness with these stories, and there were a hundred of them to be heard! She just could not believe in all of them. Although she did not doubt he was selfish and arrogant, being a King and all.

The gossiping continued for a while, much to Lila's dismay, with the stories getting ever more extravagant and crazy with each moment that passed. Eventually though, after about an hour, the talk died down as everyone became too tired to continue. Finally, Lila heard the girls put out the lamps and get into bed for the night. She let out an exhausted sigh, wanting nothing more than a good night rest. Tomorrow she was going to start working in a castle far from home, alongside many people she had never met before.

Lila suddenly found herself suddenly feeling homesick. After all, her father was not here to bid her good-night and kiss her forehead. Plus, all that ridiculous gossip she had been listening to was a bit discouraging to say the least, even if she did not believe it all. She almost wanted to return home already!

Just then, someone tapped Lila's shoulder. Her eyes flew open and she looked over to see none other than Daphne in light of the moon.

"D-Do you think the things they were saying are true? What if this job is more dangerous than we thought?" She asked fearfully.

Lila had to calm her own racing heart before she could even answer.

"Do not let it worry you Daphne. Most rumors get worse as they are passed along. I am sure all these stories have only been exaggerated." She said logically.

Daphne seemed to let her reassuring words sink in carefully.

"You are probably right. Thank you Lila. Good-night, sleep well. Sorry to have bothered you." She said, sounding quite relieved.

She climbed back down to her bed and didn't get up again. It took some time after that, but eventually Lila found herself able to relax once more. She just had to do exactly what she told Daphne to do: not worry herself. Besides, neither of them could lose heart after coming this far!

Lila finally felt herself fall into a deep and restful sleep. The next morning when she woke up, the bright sunrise and sweet dreams she had the night before gave her the courage to face the day.

It was early in the morning and the weather was absolutely lovely again, but Westan was on his way to the library with yet another day of work awaiting him. He would be sure to keep up the pressure on his teacher today in hopes that the man would become too afraid to remain here as his tutor. Westan wondered just how long it would take to frighten him away like all the rest before him. It was usually quite easy, with most men quitting after only two days.

Once he arrived at the Library Mr. Jameson was already waiting there for him. The man immediately gave a deep bow and a nervous greeting.

"Good afternoon sire!" He said anxiously.

Westan glared at him in the scariest way he could.

"Be quiet! Just get started already." He snarled.

Mr. Jameson nodded fervently. "Of course my Lord!"

Westan just nodded as he went over and sat in his chair, ready to begin his torment. But to his surprise the teacher approached him again with a

deep bow.

"What?" He asked through gritted teeth.

"My King, if you are so inclined, I would ask if you might prefer to work out in the garden today. The weather is very nice and I thought you might enjoy the change of scenery!" He said nervously.

"The garden?" Westan repeated, quite surprised by the idea.

"Of course if you would prefer to stay here that would be fine too!" The man said anxiously.

Westan felt an unexpected wave of excitement wash over him. Studying out in the garden on a day as grand as this? He certainly would never be opposed to such a glorious idea! He could even go straight to the stables after his lesson for a nice horse ride! It was a perfect idea actually, and even Zacchaeus could not condemn it since the teacher had suggested it. Although, he could not let the tutor think he approved in anyway.

"I suppose, if you insist. Whatever will help you instruct better than a dog." Westan said coldly.

Mr. Jameson gave a nervous smile and bowed in obedience. Then a servant came and led them both out to the garden. Westan followed anxiously, ever so eager to see the sun and feel the warm glow of its light on his face.

Finally, after thirteen hallways and five corridors they exited the castle. Westan slowed his pace as they trekked across the garden and took a deep breath of the fresh air before exhaling it slowly. He suddenly felt more at ease and completely relaxed. Truly, a warm and sunny day could cure any bad mood of his.

Eventually they reached a small pavilion with a small table that was already arranged with books and chairs for the two of them. Mr. Jameson

quickly gathered his notes and papers while Westan took his seat and looked around the area, still feeling quite surprised.

"Whenever you are ready to begin my Lord!" Mr. Jameson said with a bow.

Westan turned and gazed around the garden, thinking of everything else he would rather be doing at that moment. Then he turned back to the table full of books and papers. He sighed.

"Look, just get this over with." He said quietly.

"Of course sire!" The man replied.

Then the teacher started giving a lecture about something or other, not that Westan was paying attention to any of it. Instead he listening to the song birds chirping and watching the gardener's dogs running around playfully. The soft breeze and lovely smell of apple blossoms nearby were also helping him to feel very relaxed. Perhaps he would go for a ride and then find a nice spot to take a quick nap.

"This will conclude todays lesson my Lord." Mr. Jameson suddenly announced.

Westan sat up and looked at him with surprise. Was it really over already?

"Oh, very well." He replied, too surprised to bothering trying to sound scary.

Then he quickly got up and left the teacher's presence, pretending to walk back to the castle. As soon as the man was out of sight though he headed right over to the horse stables. He soon found Black Oak, his favorite riding stallion, and immediately went on a nice dash around the garden. The servants riding along with him quickly fell behind, as they always did, and it did not take long before he was able to get far enough away to find a hiding spot. He took Black Oak towards a small wooded area

and tied him to a tree. Then quietly he watched as the servants rode passed in search of him.

Westan smiled to himself. Finally, some alone time! He was starting to feel like he might lose his mind with all these people following him around constantly. Days like today truly did not come often enough. Now he could really have some fun and enjoy this fine day.

Westan untied Dark Oak and brought him down to the pond at the end of the trees to get a drink. He was feeling quite thirsty himself, but the pond was far too murky to drink from. Just then a grand idea came to him. Westan quickly set his crown down on the grass and jumped in the water, feeling just hot enough for a cool swim.

The water rushed over him in an ice cold wave. It was so crisp and fresh, still cool from the winters passing. This was his favorite time to enjoy swimming, the water would get too warm by mid-summer.

"Why not join me Oak?" He called to the horse.

The stallion just ignored him as usual and continued to drink.

"You are no fun old boy!" Westan said with a disappointed sigh.

Black Oak was never fond of getting wet, and was indeed quite old for a horse. Dark Oak had been his main riding horse for the past nine years for very sentimental reasons. The horse was actually the offspring of the stallion Westan's father always rode. He had an unusual connection with the horse, but he always felt at ease around him. After all, Dark Oak never tried to tell him what to do or how to think, or scold him over everything he did wrong. In fact, Dark Oak was the only person Westan felt he could truly be himself around.

After a few minutes he decided to get out of the water. As he did a breeze came and chilled his back as he tried to wring out his clothes. Westan laughed, wishing he had brought an extra change of garments that

day. Then he jumped on Dark Oak and headed over to his favorite rest spot to take a nap before any of the servants found him. He quickly rode over to the largest willow tree in the garden, his clothes nearly drying on the way there. This was his favorite place to sleep mostly because the tree's branches were so thick that they blocked out the sun and gave him a very secure feeling of privacy.

When Westan reached where his napping couch constantly sat, he dismounted and allowed the horse to roam. Then Westan lay back on the seat and closed his eyes. After a moment he smiled and let out a long sigh. He felt so relaxed and so content right now. All he really wanted was more time like this to enjoy by himself! Was it really too much to ask? Why did he always have to have servants or guards hovering over him all day long? He felt like he was suffocating some days! Why did his life have to be so complicated?

"I really hate being King..." Westan mumbled.

Then he closed his eyes and fell asleep. His dreams were often short but peaceful. Sometimes he would even see his parents in them. They were always smiling and happy to see him. Every time he woke up it seemed too soon.

Westan's eyes flew open and he suddenly sat up from his sleep. He could hear Dark Oak somewhere nearby neighing, as the stallion often did when someone other than himself tried to corral him. He wondered if the servants had found them already.

Westan got up and carefully ducked behind the tree's trunk. He looked around the other side, where it sounded like Dark Oak was, and was surprised to see both Mr. Jameson and his son Bartholomew of all people, standing with the horse near some grass.

"What are you doing out here all by yourself I wonder?" Bartholomew asked the horse gently.

Then carefully he grabbed Dark Oak's reigns and started petting his ears. Westan scowled angrily at the boy for touching his private horse, but he remained quiet, not wanting to give away his position.

"It seems he has gotten lost from its rider. We should walk it back to the stables." Mr. Jameson said, looking around the area for any sign of someone.

Westan quickly ducked down, just barely escaping notice.

"Indeed I agree father, but he looks to be enjoying himself out here." Bartholomew said with a smile, petting Dark Oak's ears again.

Westan thought about running away before the servants rode by again looking for him, but he really did not want to leave the horse alone with these two.

Mr. Jameson sighed. "Well we do not have all day to spend out here my son. We must go and prepare for tomorrow's session."

Just then Westan smiled. These men had no idea that he was nearby listening! Which meant this was a perfect opportunity to hear what they had to say about him and his lessons right now. He could not have wished for a better situation.

"I know we must father, but we will have plenty of time for that later. I only wish to enjoy this lovely garden a bit more." The boy said.

His father sighed again. "Very well. We can wait five minutes I suppose."

His son nodded, and then turned back to Dark Oak. He took the horse's reigns again and walked him towards the taller grass to graze. The horse was hesitant at first, but eventually he followed along. Bartholomew patted him gently and looked around the area with awe.

"Such skillful work! Honestly, it is no wonder everyone speaks so highly of the King's garden!" He said.

"Indeed, I thought we had seen to best back in Darbish's mansions. But they pale in comparison to these works." Mr. Jameson said in agreement.

Bartholomew nodded. "I cannot imagine viewing grounds like this every day. Truly a privilege I would say."

"It is a very serene and peaceful place. I am glad the King was able to enjoy it today." His father replied.

His son smiled gently. "I just knew he would. Honestly, all he did yesterday was stare out the window. It was quite clear he was longing to be anywhere other than the library with us."

Westan felt his breath catch and he risked a peek at the two of them, confused as to their meaning.

Mr. Jameson nodded. "Indeed, he seemed to completely relax out here today. I nearly thought he was listening to my lesson! I plan to ask if he wishes to come out here again tomorrow. Although, I am a bit uncomfortable acting as if the idea is all my own."

"Come now father, we both discussed it so you need not feel it was all my idea. Besides, I do not wish to offend the King any further, as he seems quite dissatisfied with me." Bartholomew said, truly looking upset.

"Now, now, no need to feel bad. You know I always value your help and input. I would not be the teacher I am without such a good assistant." His father said reassuringly.

His son smiled. "Thank you, as always father. I am glad the King was able to relax as well. Perhaps he is just feeling stressed. I am sure the life of a King is quite hard."

Mr. Jameson sighed. "I agree. Such a shame though, for he seems to be a smart individual. If only he would apply himself just a little!"

The boy shrugged. "Perhaps he is merely in need of some encouragement."

His father nodded. "You may be right. If I can get him to relax again I will try to find ways to engage him in activity. Although, I must be cautious so as not to upset him. His temper is quite volatile."

"Yes, I think that would be wise. But maybe one day he will take interest in something you have to say. Everyone has something they want to learn." Bartholomew said, sounding hopeful.

Mr. Jameson chuckled. "One can only hope. Now then, let us head back and return the horse. No rider has come looking for him yet."

The boy nodded. "You are quite right. The person may be worried and headed back there to see if he has been returned."

Then the two of them took Dark Oak and began walking back towards the horse stables. Westan watched from his hiding spot until they were out of sight, not even sure how to feel about the scene he had just witnessed.

After a moment he stood up and started making his way back to the castle. He didn't even notice when the servants caught up to him and followed him back to his chambers. Westan was more focused on all the planning he had to do before his lesson tomorrow.

Lila awoke that morning to the sound of loud knocking on the door.

"GET UP LADIES! TIME TO GET TO WORK!" The head maid shouted out in the hallway.

Everyone jumped up quickly and got dressed into their uniforms, which consisted of a simple apron and a grey bandana or bonnet for their hair. When they exited the room the head maid was waiting.

"Now ladies, I will not be saying this twice: you are all good for nothing servants, and rest assured you can all be easily replaced. You will keep your heads down and your mouths shut. If I catch anyone slacking off or wandering around where they do not belong you will be punished. If you make three offenses, you will be sent home without question. Do not take these warnings lightly girls, because I will not feel bad for you." She said harshly.

All the girls started looking around with unease. Then the head maid began assigning their tasks. Lila's group was assigned to sweep and dust the hallways and rooms downstairs along the west wing. This included the library, the ballroom, and kitchen areas. Other groups were assigned to the front of the castle, the east wing, and the rest were stationed in each area upstairs.

When Lila's group reached the first destination everyone got started immediately. She watched the experienced maids carefully, copying their efficient routines. The head maid would come by every hour or so to check on them. Everyone made sure to stay out of her way and avoid catching her fowl attention. Unfortunately, at about noon Daphne accidentally bumped into her while sweeping, definitely catching her attention.

"Why, how dare you!" The maid shouted coldly.

"Oh my! I am so sorry!" Daphne said nervously.

The woman glared at her angrily.

"Watch what you are doing you little brat! Do you want to go home already?" She said harshly.

Daphne blushed and shook her head.

"N-No ma'am! I am so sorry!" She said again.

The woman crossed her arms. "Good! Now get back to work!"

Daphne nodded fervently and quickly went back to sweeping. Some of the girls watching giggled at her embarrassment, but Lila shot them all angrily looks. After the head maid left she came over to Daphne's side to see if she was okay. It was then that Lila realized she was crying.

"Hey, do not let her scare you!" She said.

Daphne shook her head and wiped away her tears. "Oh Lila, what if I mess up again? What if she does indeed kick me out?"

Lila smiled. "Do not think like that, it will do you little good. Just try to be a bit more careful from now on."

Daphne nodded, tears still in her eyes. "I suppose you are right."

Lila stayed by her side the rest of the day and worked to finish her assignment quickly. But she noticed that the rest of the new maids were busy gossiping the whole time and had barely made any progress with theirs. Some of the guards nearby even neglected their posts to join in with the talk!

"Oh my! Did you hear what happened to Eliza the other day? She nearly escaped death!" A young girl said with big eyes.

"What happened?" Someone asked.

"Well, she spilled the King's tea outside his door and he was extremely cross about it! Luckily for her though she ran away before he saw her face." The girl explained fearfully.

A young guard chuckled. "Oh please, you should see how his new tutors are being treated! I bet you all they will be imprisoned by the end of the week."

All the women gasped quietly and continued murmuring things to one another. Back home these kinds of rumors all sounded like far-fetched

myths and legends, but when you were here in the castle it was much more real with true suspense and fear in every word spoken! Hundreds of these secret whispers were being passed along in every part of the castle by almost all of the maids and servants, each one sounding more extreme than the last. Lila actually found herself feeling a little concerned by some of the things said, as they could be quite shocking. But she supposed that worrying would do her little good now.

That day it took well into the evening for her group to finish their assigned areas. By the time they reached the kitchen for supper Lila was completely famished. The provided meal that night consisted of fresh bread straight from the kitchen along with some water. It wasn't the grandest banquet, but it was more than she had at home some days. Afterwards the maids returned to their rooms to get some much needed rest.

Lila supposed that despite everything, the day had not been bad overall. While cleaning she had been able to fully admire the castle's beautiful interior better than the night before. The walls were made of smoothed grey stone that shimmered in the light and the stairs were of creamy pearl colored marble. The hallway arches and doors were lined with gold trim with dark blue curtains hanging from every tall glass window, and the royal crest decorated all the shields displayed above each doorway. The castle truly was a lavish sight to behold! Lila wondered what it was like to grow up in such a grand place as this. She knew that the King was still just a young man, not even twenty years old yet. His parents, the late King and Queen had been murdered many years ago, leaving the young prince alone to rule. Lila wondered if such bitterness contributed to his cruel behavior. She really pitied his sad story actually.

As soon as they reached their room Lila climbed into bed, quite worn out from not only her work but also from stress. She had been thinking of her

father all day and was now feeling homesick. Lila longed to see him and kiss his forehead and know exactly how his condition was faring! Never before had she been so far away and for so long. It was proving more difficult than she ever imagined.

That night Lila felt a few tears roll down her cheeks before she fell asleep. She wished to go back to the days of her youth, back when she was small enough to still sleep in her father's arms and before he was sick. She was now ever more determined to work hard and return home as soon as possible.

Chapter 04- Now Things Are Getting Interesting

The next day Westan headed to the library early for his session. He had been up all night pondering over his new tutor's private conversation about him the day before, contemplating how best to use it to his advantage, and now he had the perfect plan in place for them.

When he entered the study room Mr. Jameson seemed a little surprised by his punctual arrival. He quickly bowed and greeted him.

"Good morning your Majesty!" He said nervously.

Westan nodded. "Yes, yes."

The teacher smiled nervously and cleared his throat awkwardly.

"W-Would your Highness wish to sit out in the garden again? The weather is quite nice today as well." He said anxiously.

Westan smiled. He had been hoping for this exact opportunity.

"Indeed, I think I would. I quite enjoyed myself yesterday." He replied.

"Very good! Then shall we head there now?" Mr. Jameson asked, looking quite relieved by his approval.

Westan nodded. Then he got up and followed the teacher to the garden where another prepared table awaited them. He sat down in his chair ready to begin.

"Teacher, I have something to discuss before we start." He announced.

The man looked at him curiously. "Yes, what is it sire?"

Westan motioned to a servant nearby. The person walked away briefly, returning a moment later with Bartholomew and two additional servants following him.

"Good-day your Majesty!" The boy greeted with a deep bow.

Then both men looked at him with confusion. Westan just smiled.

"I heard from a reliable source that you two have been discussing my private sessions with your assistant, despite the fact that I dismissed him." He stated coldly.

Mr. Jameson's eyes bulged with a mixture of surprise and fear, and Bartholomew seemed too stunned to even react for a few good seconds. Then the teacher quickly moved in front of his son and bowed as he spoke up nervously.

"My deepest apologies my Lord! We meant no disrespect, but my son is my only helper and I deeply rely on his input!" He explained.

"So that is the excuse you use to justify such arrogant actions?" Westan asked with a raised eyebrow.

The man gulped nervously. "I-I apologize your Majesty..."

Westan gave a long sigh.

"Well perhaps I shall overlook it, since you are my teacher." He said.

Mr. Jameson let out a breath of relief and wiped his sweaty brow.

"However, your assistant whom I never wished to see again, perhaps he shall be made to answer for this disrespect." Westan said with another smile.

The teacher's face fell again and Bartholomew tensed up with wide eyes. Then Mr. Jameson quickly dropped to the ground with a bow.

"No sire, please! I am the one who should be made to answer for this! Leave the boy be!" He begged.

Bartholomew quickly came to his father's side.

"No your Majesty, do not punish my father! You are correct; it was all indeed my fault!" He said anxiously.

Mr. Jameson turned to his son with shock.

"Be quiet my son!" He said.

Bartholomew shook his head. "No father it is my fault and you know it! I was the one who kept insisting you talk to me!"

"ENOUGH! Silence, both of you!" Westan shouted, even more irritated by their groveling.

Both men froze and gazed up at him with fear as he stood up and came towards them slowly.

"I do not plan on punishing either of you. In fact, I have a better idea in mind." Westan said with a smirk, finally getting to the part he really wanted.

Mr. Jameson and Bartholomew glanced from one another anxiously, so he continued.

"If the two of you wish to spare yourself my wrath, all you have to do is convince my council man Zacchaeus to send you away." Westan said.

Both men gazed at him fearfully. Eventually Mr. Jameson gathered the courage to speak up.

"Your Majesty, he will never allow us to leave unless we have a good reason! Fear is not a good enough excuse." He said quietly.

Westan scoffed. "I am well aware of that! But you do not want to disobey me, so listen carefully: you men will merely tell my council man that I will never come to be taught. Then perhaps he will let you leave and I can be free from all this schooling for good!"

Both Mr. Jameson and Bartholomew looked at each other with unease, clearly not comfortable with the idea he had presented. However, Westan was not exactly giving them a choice in this matter.

"Do either of you have a problem with what the King has requested? Do as I say or else!" He snapped, using his authority as a threat like he always did.

Mr. Jameson bowed again anxiously.

"If that is what the King wishes, then of course! We shall talk to him right away!" He said.

Westan smiled triumphantly.

"Very good." He said, feeling victorious.

Just then he noticed Bartholomew shaking his head with disbelief.

"If you wish us to leave my Lord then we shall, and we will tell this man anything you want us to. But please your Highness, do not give up on your studies!" He said with another deep bow.

Westan scowled at the boy with shock. "Excuse me?"

Bartholomew bowed his head this time as he spoke.

"Even though you have been displeased by our actions here, I beg you not to abandon these lessons! Do not let our disrespect discourage you!" He begged.

Westan crossed his arms and glared at the boy angrily.

"*You* have nothing to do with this so mind your own business! Why should I keep bothering with skills I will never be able to master? I am sick and tired of wasting my time on such useless work!" He snapped.

Bartholomew looked up and examined him with warm eyes.

"My King I do not think anyone is truly unable to learn, least of all someone like yourself." He said gently.

Westan huffed loudly and rolled his eyes. Just what did this boy know anyways? He was already a smart and well taught individual! How could someone like him understand what such constant failure and embarrassment felt like?

"Perhaps that is easy for you to say, someone who has been reading and writing for many years! I on the other hand have gone through too many tutors to count, with none of them being able to teach me a single thing! What makes you think this will ever change?" He said bitterly.

The boy gazed at him with eyes full of sudden understanding. Then he smiled and shook his head.

"Well you certainly seem quite clever to me. I do not doubt your ability to succeed in anything that you really wish to." He said.

Westan suddenly blushed, both surprised by the boy's boldness. But before he could decide how to respond Bartholomew spoke up again.

"Please sire, let us stay and finish our commission. Just give us some more time to prove ourselves to you!" He said earnestly.

Westan folded his arms and examined the boy with scrutiny, completely taken back by his persistence. He wondered why on earth anyone would rather stay here and teach him instead of just running away! Surely though, there was only one likely cause for such determination.

"I am no fool! It is not as if you really care whether I am taught or not, you just want to make sure you get your money from Zacchaeus and avoid any disgrace, right?" Westan said.

Bartholomew looked utterly shocked by his words and shook his head quite vigorously.

"No! Never would that be the case my Lord! Both my father and I are very passionate about teaching! We love nothing more than to help our students. I only express my heartfelt desire as my father's assistant to help you improve your abilities. Come now! What would it hurt for you to let us stay?" He said.

Westan's eyes widened with surprise at such a bold challenge. He stared into the boy's eyes for a moment, seeing that his gaze actually looked full of genuine concern.

Westan shook his head in confusion. He usually did not expect loyalty from any servants, least of all those who were hired in from elsewhere. His whole life's experience taught him that no one truly cared about him

personally in any way but for what they might gain from him. Yet this boy was nearly risking his own life in order to help him! But why? If he was not motivated to stay by money or fear, what other reason could there be?

Westan stroked his chin thoughtfully. He supposed it would not hurt to let these men stay for a little while longer and see if they could indeed be of help to him. Besides, he was now more curious to find out what their deeper motives were than anything else.

"Very well then. I shall allow you one more week to convince me of your right to remain here. But if you fail I will no longer tolerate your presence at all." Westan said seriously.

Mr. Jameson dropped his jaw with surprise, but Bartholomew gave an unexpected smile.

"Thank you my Lord, we shall do our utmost to be of assistance to you!" He said with another bow.

Westan shook his head again in astonishment. Perhaps this boy was merely too naive to even understand what it was he was doing and risking at this point. His over eagerness really was quite puzzling.

"Well, you better get started then." Westan said with a sigh.

Bartholomew helped his father back to his feet, and after a moment the man finally snapped out of his shocked state.

"Thank you your Majesty for your mercy and graciousness! I hope to be of more use!" Mr. Jameson said with a bow and a trembling voice.

Westan just nodded and gestured for him to move along. The man then returned to where his books and papers were and tried to get the lesson started once more. But he still looked flustered and confused, perhaps even in a daze. After a moment it was clear that the teacher could not seem to pull himself together.

Westan frowned. Why was the teacher still so upset? Sure he had been trying to scare the two of them into leaving, but it's not like he actually would have punished them if they had not! Westan would have just kept on trying to frighten them until they agreed to his plan. Honestly, if the teacher continued on this way then there would be no point in letting them stay at all.

"E-Excuse me sire." Bartholomew said from beside him.

Westan turned with surprise to see him bowing deeply once more.

"If your Highness would allow it, I would beg you to allow me to return as my father's assistant. But I need not be counted as anything more than a servant like any other during your lessons, just please allow me to go and aid him!" He begged with worry.

"I suppose you might as well, seeing as your father is rather useless without you." Westan mumbled as he rolled his eyes.

Bartholomew looked up from his bow with a truly genuine smile.

"Thank you my Lord, you are very good." He said gratefully.

Then he went to his father's side and quickly began setting up the books and supplies for him. The teacher seemed to calm immediately at his son's presence, and both even relaxed a little as the session progressed. Obviously they were also happy to be working together once more. Bartholomew was quite lucky to be able to spend so much time with his father each day. Westan was very envious of him actually, as he had never been old enough to conduct any meaningful work with his father before. He would have liked to help him with a document or decree one day, perhaps even learn from him how to work as a King. But he supposed that even if his own father was still alive he would be of little use to him in such an uneducated state.

Westan sighed. Deep down he truly wondered if his poor reading and writing abilities stemmed from his lack of effort or intelligence. After all, how many years *should* it take for one to learn such simple things? Sure he did not bother with to listen to his tutors now, be that was only because he never seemed to understand his studies as a child. The words never looked right to him and the teachers always said that his writing was somehow backwards despite him having copied it exactly the way he saw it. Westan almost wanted to hope that Mr. Jameson and Bartholomew could find a way to help him, although he would not be holding his breath for such an outcome.

When the session was over Westan got up and prepared to leave for the day, so both Mr. Jameson and Bartholomew stood with a bow to await his departure. He noticed that both men were still looking quite uneasy about the events from earlier. He nearly felt bad about it all now seeing as they truly seemed to be good-hearted men. He almost wanted to do *something* to calm them down a little, although he was not sure what. Eventually he had an idea of sorts.

"Good-day to you both. Until tomorrow." Westan said in the least scary voice he could possibly manage.

Mr. Jameson stayed as stiff as a board and just nodded, but Bartholomew raised his head just a bit.

"Thank you sire, we bid you a good-day as well." He said with a slightly nervous smile.

Westan looked away with embarrassment at such a kind reply and quickly left their presence. He then returned to his room for the night much like any other day, although for some reason he was not feeling quite as depressed as usual.

Each day quickly became routine for Lila and Daphne. They got up before sunrise, started cleaning right after breakfast, and continued on late into the night until the work was done. It did not take long for them to become proficient at their jobs, and both of them even starting to feel more comfortable with their new life. Lila was actually almost accustomed to the castle layout now too and could nearly find any room in the castle with ease!

However, some of the maids were proving to be troublesome. It had not taken long for some of the girls to become jealous of Daphne, who often had guards looking at her or trying to talk to her during work. The girls actually started bullying her, saying cruel things and often threatening her too. Lila stuck close to her side, refusing to let them get away with their cruelty.

In general though all was going well, and it did not take long for the seventh day of their first week to come. After supper the head maid took them to the accounting room to receive their pay; one whole gold coin. Neither Daphne nor she could wait to send the hard earned money back home to those who were waiting. After work they both ran straight to the post man to have it delivered.

"I am so excited for my father to see this!" Lila said as she handed the messenger a package full of silver coins and a letter.

"Yes, I feel the same! My siblings will be so relieved!" Daphne replied as she too gave the messenger a package.

Lila had wished to send the whole gold coin but she had forgotten about the delivery fee. Then she decided to send a letter too in order to assure her father all was going well so that was another expense. After that she kept the last small copper coin to treat herself to a little treat. After all, nineteen seven silver coins would be more than enough to send for now.

It was late into the night so both Daphne and she wandered around the village marketplace for a bit. There were so many places to look around and shop at that both of them were simply astounded. There were clothes and foods from all over the world, exotic animals and flowers, and a whole variety of people doing the buying and selling. Tantalizing aromas were everywhere, but one in particular caught Lila's attention, so she left Daphne and went inside a small bakery to find out what the smell was coming from. There were breads and cakes displayed everywhere, but she was after one very special pastry. Then Lila found the special treat and paid the man his fee, and returned to her friend outside a moment later with two fresh cinnamon buns.

"Here!" Lila said as she handed Daphne one.

"Oh Lila, I do not have the money to pay you back for this." She said with embarrassment.

Indeed, she had nothing. Daphne had sent her whole amount, minus the messenger fee, to her siblings. She had not even wanted to spend any on a letter. Her family must be very poor indeed.

Lila smiled. "This is a special treat for the two of us! We have both worked very hard and I think we have earned it. Do not worry about the money."

Daphne smiled and took the gooey bun happily. "Thank you Lila. You are so kind."

She shook her head. "Do not mention it. Now eat up, they smell divine!"

This was possibly the best thing Lila had ever tasted. It was so sweet, with just the right amount of cinnamon and frosting. She was glad to have saved a coin for it.

"Mmmm! So delicious!" Daphne said.

Lila nodded. "Every week we should come and buy something new! My treat."

"Oh my, every week? How long do you think it would take to try everything?" She said with a giggle.

Lila shrugged. "Let us find out."

When they returned to the castle both of them decided to eat supper on the staircase in the east wing of the castle. Scents from the Kings buffet wafted through all the hallways, making their mouth's water.

"Oh my, I wish we could have been assigned as cooks! I hear they get to eat from the King's table." Daphne said enviously.

"Yes, but I also heard that they have to be taste testers to check for poison before he is served." Lila stated.

Daphne's face immediately fell. "Oh...then I am grateful not to have been picked for such a job..."

"The smells from here are quite nice though. They remind me of home." Lila replied.

She felt a little homesick thinking about the stews and nut breads she used to make back on the farm. She also missed how her father would share at least one meal with her no matter how busy the day's work had been.

"Indeed. I miss the food my young brother would always prepare. Although he is but fourteen, he is very skilled in the kitchen. He even works at the local inn with the cooks." Daphne said with a smile.

"Is he the oldest sibling after you?" Lila asked curiously.

She shook her head and smiled at the opportunity to talk of her family. Daphne then went on to tell Lila that there were three boys and seven girls in all her siblings. From oldest to youngest it went her, two boys, three girls, the boy who worked at the inn as a cook, and then four more girls. The next two boys after her were twins at seventeen, and Daphne was twenty. They too had lived on a farm over in the village next to Lila's. About a year ago their mother passed away, and soon after that her father too. Daphne said it had been heartbreak, but at least they had each other still so none of them were ever lonely. Her twin brothers actually tried to come here instead of her to work, but she would not let them. In her mind they were still too young to face such a dangerous situation, so she would be the one to leave. That way too if anything did happen to her the oldest boys could still take care of the rest of the children.

Lila was saddened by her story. She could not bear to think of losing her own father in such a way, nor could she imagine what it felt like to provide for so many family members. When she was younger Lila had always wished to have a sister, as being an only child growing up on a farm left her lonely at times. But now she had someone to work alongside each day. Lila would be sure to help Daphne's family in any way she could, and invite them over to her house when they returned home.

When the two of them were done eating they retired to their room. Daphne was still in the best mood she had ever seen her in, obviously immeasurably relieved to finally have been able to send some money back to her family. Lila felt relieved too and hoped that the money could pay for her father to visit a doctor right away. That night she went to sleep feeling quite happy and satisfied, another perfectly uneventful day completed.

Chapter 05- An Unexpected Turn of Events

"Well then sire, that is ends it for today. You did excellent my Lord!" Mr. Jameson said with a warm smile.

"Indeed sire, you did very well. Tomorrow you will be moving on to the next lesson." Bartholomew added encouragingly.

Westan frowned. It was over already?

Almost a week had gone by now and some progress had actually been made with his studies! Indeed, Mr. Jameson and Bartholomew were both very intelligent and patient, which encouraged him to make at least some effort. He would try to pay attention and concentrate, and after about two days he had greatly improved on his reading, and even a bit on his writing! Now he nearly began to look forward to their lessons together, and when they ended each day it seemed too soon. Since he been able to come this far so miraculously he had hope for learning even more in the future!

Westan supposed though that he also had come to enjoy the company of both his teachers each day. They had come to relax considerably since the day he threatened them to leave, and now he saw that they were truly good men and still seemed interested in his well-being despite how he had treated them. Such sincerity was quite unusual especially for servants, but in a way it felt good. It had been a long time since he felt at ease around anyone other than Zacchaeus.

Today in particular had been very peaceful and relaxing, with lovely weather on top of it all. But now the session was over, and Westan had nothing better to do than sit in his room or wander around outside by himself until supper came around. He really was not looking forward to either option though. However, Westan had been preparing for this ever

since he realized his own boredom last night. Perhaps now he could try his plan to avoid such lonesome events.

"Mr. Jameson, Bartholomew." He called out awkwardly.

Both men were busy packing away their papers and books, but they stopped and looked up at him.

"Yes my Lord?" Mr. Jameson replied.

Westan cleared his throat nervously, wondering if this was indeed a good idea or not.

"I am departing now, but I want to discuss some things about my studies with the two of you and it cannot wait until tomorrow. If you have no previous plans I would like you both to join me for supper tonight." He said, trying to sound casual.

Both of the men stared at him with astonishment, and for a moment neither looked able to make a reply.

"Is something wrong?" Westan snapped with embarrassment, almost wishing he had not made the offer.

Bartholomew suddenly smiled and shook his head.

"No my Lord, we would be honored is all. We certainly did not expect such an invitation!" He said with a deep bow.

"Yes indeed, we are truly honored your Majesty!" His father added, still looking quite shocked.

Westan felt a small wave of relief and nodded.

"Very well, I will see you tonight then." He said, standing up to leave.

Both men bowed as he departed, and Westan quickly left the garden and made his way back to his chambers. When he reached the room he flopped down on the bed and covered his face with a pillow, groaning quietly.

Just what he was doing? Had he actually invited Mr. Jameson and Bartholomew to supper with him? Sure he had thought up the idea last night

and it all seemed to make sense, but no King before him had ever invited such low ranking men to dine with them, not even his own father!

But still, surely there could be no harm in it. Westan liked these men after all, and he really did have important things to discuss with them tonight. Besides, who was going to tell him otherwise anyways? *He* was the King now, and *he* would do as *he* pleased!

Westan eventually stood up and started getting ready for his unusual evening. He decided to dress up for the occasion, so he put on his dark blue cloak along with his father's large gold necklace. He did not usually wear such things unless it was a special event, but tonight he just felt like putting it on.

Around his normal supper time Westan arrived at the dining hall and seated himself in the large gold chair at the end of the main table. Usually he ate alone in his room, so the servants looked quite surprised by his presence. Still, the food was already prepared and waiting with silver platters lining one end of the table to the other, as it was every night in case he should attend. Guards and servants stationed themselves all along the hall walls awaiting his commands, and thirty chairs were set along the long table meant for guests. But tonight would be the first night since his parent's death that more than one person would be sitting at this table. Zacchaeus had never even dinned with him, as his work usually kept him too busy.

After a few moments a messenger came to let Westan know that Mr. Jameson and Bartholomew had arrived. He immediately had them called in to enter. Both men were then escorted in and presented to him, each also well dressed for the occasion in blue gentlemen's clothes.

"Good-evening your Majesty!" They both said with a nervous bow.

"Greetings. You may sit." Westan said, almost feeling a little anxious himself.

Then they were shown their seats, the two of them sitting next to one another on Westan's right side. Both of them looked around the room and table curiously, their eyes full of awe.

"Let us eat first. We can discuss matters later." Westan said, suddenly feeling too embarrassed to talk about his announcement just yet.

At his words the servants immediately began serving the food. Westan received his plates first of course, and then his guests were tended to. Both Mr. Jameson and Bartholomew looked quite uncomfortable as the servants served them whatever they chose from among the many prepared platters presented to them.

Once their plates were full everyone began eating. No one said a single word during the meal, but still Westan was enjoying the occasion. He could not help but watch both men curiously as their eyes lit up at tasting something good, and when they met with something they did not quite like. He nearly wanted to laugh a few times as Bartholomew politely tried to drink the wine he had been served although he clearly was not fond of it.

Once they all finished their food the servants came and took their plates away, as well as all the other food platters. Then Westan felt relaxed enough to talk.

"Mr. Jameson, Bartholomew, I summoned you both here tonight to make an important announcement." He said seriously.

Both men watched him with slightly nervous faces, so he continued.

"It has not been a whole week yet, but you have both done a good job conducting my study sessions. I have decided that you shall indeed be allowed to remain here as my tutors." Westan stated.

Both men looked to be in shock for a moment, then they both relaxed with relief. Bartholomew was the first to speak up.

"I am glad we could be of service to you my King. We are most honored to remain here." He said happily.

His father nodded. "Yes sire, we are grateful to be deemed so worthy by you."

Westan was feeling quite embarrassed again, so he looked away as he moved onto the next point he wanted to make.

"Yes, very good. I also wanted to say that I cannot let anyone see a mere assistant working during my lessons. You should both be sure to wear the clothes of a tutor to prevent me from having a bad appearance. I will surely be ashamed if anyone were to see me with you otherwise." He said, faking an annoyed tone of voice.

Westan had tried very hard to come up with that excuse before coming to supper in order to avoid actually having to apologize or take back what he had said to Bartholomew before, but the boy did not seem completely fooled by it.

"Thank you sire; I would not wish to bring any dishonor on you." He said gently.

Westan nodded, and then continued on to the last statement he wanted to make before he became too embarrassed.

"Well, I also think you both should dine with me at night like this. I may have questions or complaints I want to discuss after my lessons and I think that this would be the best time to do so, else it might take up time during my session." He said casually.

Bartholomew almost chocked on his sip of wine, and even the nearby servants and guards looked surprised. Everyone gazed at him with astonishment.

"Of course my King, we would be most honored!" Mr. Jameson said eventually.

"Indeed, honored beyond words." Bartholomew eventually managed to say.

Westan felt a small grin forming at the sight of their very sincere faces. Their company every night was sure to be quite entertaining to say the least!

Westan had nothing else to say for the night, and the meal was over with now, so he stood up to leave. Both men got up and bowed respectfully as he prepared to depart.

"Until tomorrow then." Westan said, nearly smiling again.

"Thank you your Majesty!" Mr. Jameson said.

"Yes, thank you sire! Good-night to you." Bartholomew said.

"To you both as well." Westan replied.

Then he left the table and returned to his chambers. Once he was finally alone there he lay back on his bed once more to think.

Westan was surprised by how good a mood he was in after such a simple meal. It had been a very long time since he had enjoyed any occasion really, especially something as common as supper. Perhaps he would have more good days like this now though. Things were certainly looking up for now.

Another week of work quickly went by for Lila and Daphne, and another gold coin was earned. After work that night they both headed straight to the post man again, ever eager to send home another week's wages.

Lila paid for another letter to send. She told her father of the past week's experiences and once again assured him all was well; in case the first letter

had not put him enough at ease. She also thanked Maryann for her help and said she loved them both very much. But Daphne once again refused to pay for a letter in order to send back as much money as she could. So Lila took the copper coin she had saved in order to treat them both to a dessert that night, and gave it to her instead.

"Here, now you can send them a letter." She said gently.

Daphne gasped. "Oh Lila, you do not need to do that! You are supposed to treat yourself with this!"

Lila shook her head. "Come on, deserts and treats are not as important as family. Go ahead and let your siblings know how much you miss them."

Her friend eyes welled up with tears as she nodded.

"Thank you Lila! You are far too kind..." She said gratefully.

"No need to thank me, we are friends after all." Lila replied.

Daphne smiled and nodded again. Then she paid the post man his fee and wrote out a very long letter on the piece of paper provided. Afterwards the man took their packages and loaded them onto his horse.

"No need to worry ladies, I can get these back to your homes in about two days if I ride fast." The man said.

"Thank you so much for your services." Lila said with a small curtsy.

The man smiled. "Just doing my job. Now go and enjoy what is left of this fine evening. Tomorrow we will have rain."

"How do you know that?" Daphne asked with surprise.

The man chuckled. "I can smell it in the air Lass. My father is a fisherman, and for much of my youth so was I."

"My father used to be a sailor before he married my mother. He used to take me fishing as well when I was a girl." Lila said.

She remembered fondly the times her father and she went out to the nearby lake to fish. He would rent a small boat, and for hours the two of

them would just sit there and enjoy the warm sun and glimmering water.

The man's smile widened. "Indeed, there is nothing quite like it."

Lila nodded in agreement. Then he got on his horse, having filled his bags completely for the day, and headed back to the mail stables. As soon as the sun rose the next day he and all the other post man there would head out to deliver their packages.

For a while Daphne and she wandered around the marketplace again, curious to see what new merchants and trades were here today. The tantalizing aromas once again engulfed them as they passed by one bakery and smoke house after another.

"Oh Lila, you cannot even buy yourself something tonight even though you have waited all week." Daphne said sadly.

Lila laughed. "I think I will be just fine. Besides, there is always next time."

"I think I should buy you something next week then!" Her friend said.

Lila shook her head. "No, I told you not to worry about it. Your siblings need that money."

Daphne wanted to protest, but she seemed unable to respond.

Lila smiled at her. "How about you promise to invite me over to eat when we got home to visit everyone? I am dying to try your brother's cooking."

Her friend's face lit up. "O-Okay! It is a deal then!"

They walked around for a bit longer before returning inside the castle. Then they ate their supper and headed to their rooms for the night. But as the two of them entered the hallway that led to their sleeping quarters they met a small group of people who were blocking the walkway. Two of them were maids whom Lila recognized, and three of them were young guards. They were all standing there and talking in what looked to be an

inappropriate manner, with one guard even embracing one of the maids closely. But as soon as Daphne and she arrived they all seemed to stop what they were doing to notice them both.

"Why, hello ladies." One of the men said with a wide smile.

"Excuse us, we just want to pass." Lila said politely.

The two maids cast her vicious glares.

"Go away!" The girl being embraced snapped.

"Yeah, mind your own business!" The other threatened.

Lila crossed her arms. "Look we are just tired and want to go to our rooms!"

Suddenly the smiling guard left the group and came towards them.

"Why not spend a little time with us first?" He said, gazing at Daphne from head to toe.

Lila puffed up her chest and glared back at him as her friend hid behind her.

"We are not interested. Now let us pass." She said with annoyance.

"Knock it off Daven, you are supposed to be over here speaking with me!" The second maid snapped angrily.

The man chuckled, and Lila suddenly realized that he smelled like alcohol.

"Oh come on, if you stay I promise you will both have a good time." He said, yanking her aside and exposing Daphne.

The other two guards whistled her way and began laughing.

"She sure is easy on the eyes!" One said.

"It bet she would make a good wife!" The other who was embracing the other girl said.

Daphne just stood there frozen in fear as the man came even closer to her. He smiled and suddenly grabbed a lock of her hair.

"Why not smile for me girl?" He said.

Lila came over and pushed the man away.

"Back off you ugly wench!" He snapped.

Lila flushed with anger. "Leave us alone or I will inform the head guard and head maid of these activities!"

The man snorted as he grabbed her arm roughly once more.

"Maybe I will not *let* you inform them then." He snarled.

This wasn't good. Lila knew there was little good in trying to reason with a drunkard!

She quickly punched him as hard as she could in the face and let out her loudest scream. He stumbled back, clearly surprised by her sudden and forceful actions. Then Lila grabbed Daphne by the hand and ran back the way they had just come. After a few moments she could tell they were not being followed, probably because the guards themselves had run away in fear of getting caught by someone. After all, a guard was to be severely punished for drinking when he was on the job. Only when he was off duty could he fraternize around the castle.

Once they made it back towards the kitchen, where plenty of people were still walking around and working, Lila finally stopped to catch her breath.

"What a bunch of jerks!" She said between pants.

Daphne suddenly sank to the ground.

"Oh my...how frightening..." She said, looking to be in a state of shock still.

Lila let out a long sigh. She supposed Daphne was not used to such inappropriate advances despite being so beautiful. But perhaps that came from have so many brothers around her back home. Lila for her part had a father who would never let any man so much as look at her inappropriately

without some kind of confrontation, but she knew how dishonorable men *could* be at times.

"Come on Daphne, let us go back the long way." She said.

Her friend nodded as Lila helped her back to her feet. Then they both went by the opposite hallway to reach the maids quarters. Once they arrived Lila surveyed the area and saw that the coast was indeed clear. Then they quickly made it back to their room and shut the door behind them.

It was then that Lila realized where she recognized the two maids from earlier from; they were in fact roommates. The two of them were already inside it seemed, talking with all the other girls present. As soon as Daphne and she entered everyone stopped and looked at them. Obviously the current gossip had been about them.

"Well, well, if it is not the lovely Daphne and her horse faced friend." The girl who had called out to the young guard from earlier and whose name Lila remembered was Tam, said with disdain.

"Are you here to ruin another party?" The other maid who had been in the embrace of the other guard, and whose name she thought was Luo, asked.

All the other girls giggled and watched the scene with interest. Lila just folded her arms and scoffed.

"None of this would have happened if you had just let us pass earlier!" She snapped.

Tam scowled and approached them with her hands on her hips.

"If you or your friend ever go near Daven again you will be sorry!" She declared menacingly.

Lila rolled her eyes as Daphne whimpered behind her back.

"I can assure you we have no intention of making advancements on your *precious* guard friend." She said sarcastically.

The girl giggled. "Oh Lila, I was not talking to you silly. The only man you could attract is, well, no one actually."

All the other maids burst out in laughter, and Lila felt herself blush with embarrassment. She knew quite well she was no beauty, but surely such comments were just plain cruel. Not that she was about to let it to get the better of her.

"If that is the case then you have nothing to fear from me. And Daphne is already spoken for, so you can tell your friend there is nothing to pursue." She said confidently.

Tam and the other maids were caught off guard by her retort for a moment, and the maid even looked slightly relieved by such news.

"Good, just make sure it stays that way." She said as she turned and quickly rejoined the group.

Lila turned and rolled her eyes with frustration. She then saw Daphne gazing at her with shock.

"I am *spoken for*?" She whispered.

Lila smiled. "Yes, well you are dedicated solely on your work and your family, right?"

Her friend nodded slowly.

Lila shrugged. "Then you are unavailable for marriage at the moment."

Daphne smiled and almost let out a laugh.

"You are so silly Lila!" Her friend said.

She shrugged. "We do what we must."

Daphne nodded. "Yes of course. Thank you."

Then they both got into her night gown and prepared for bed. Lila was far more tired now and definitely wanted nothing more than to get some sleep. Before she got in bed though Daphne tapped her shoulder.

"Hey, do not listen to what those girls said. I think you are plenty pretty Lila." She said softly.

Lila blushed and half smiled.

"Do not worry about me having hurt feelings Daphne. I know very well I am not that lovely, but I tend not to care about such things. I do not need to be beautiful in order to be myself." She said.

Daphne smiled. "And I like you just the way you are, lovely and all."

"Thank you, that means a lot to me." Lila replied bashfully.

She shrugged. "Yes well, beauty can feel more like a curse than anything else sometimes."

Lila giggled. "It is alright now though, since you are already spoken for."

Daphne had to put her hand over her mouth to keep from laughing loudly and waking up any already sleeping girls.

She shushed Daphne through her own giggles and they both quickly got into bed. Just a few minutes later the maids put out the candle and the whole room became quiet. Lila lay awake for a while thinking of many things, but mostly of the mean comments made to her that night. What she had spoken to Daphne was true, and she really did not care about such trivial things like beauty. But still, it was still not easy to hear other people call her ugly. Why did girls who were clearly prettier than her even feel the need to point such details out? She could understand them being threatened by someone gorgeous like Daphne, but someone as plain as her? There could be no motive but to simply injure her feelings! How utterly unnecessary and childish. These maids were lucky she was not inclined to fight back.

Lila eventually shook such thoughts away. It was not like she planned to stay here with their company forever. From now on she would just have to

ignore the girls as best she could and focus on working hard until she could leave.

Chapter 06- As Fate Would Have It

Westan looked out the window and scowled. It was still raining, and quite heavy too. He had been hoping all morning that the sky would clear and that the sun would come out before his studies were scheduled, but it seemed it was not meant to be. He would just have to face the fact that he would be cooped up in the library instead of being out in the garden today. Although he supposed all was not bad since his lessons did not have to be canceled. At least he could meet with Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson still and enjoy their company during such dreary weather. These lessons were the only thing he looked forward to anymore, besides seeing them both at supper.

The progress made during his lessons had been quite nice too. He could almost read whole paragraphs now! In his spare time Westan had been busying himself with reading the storybooks that his father had read to him as a child. He had nearly forgotten some of the stories, so it was nice to reacquaint himself with them. Right now he was reading his very favorite book, the one his father had read to him the mos. It gave him a strange confidence and warm feeling in his heart to read the words he remembered his father saying to him so many years ago.

Just then a knock came at the door and interrupted his privacy.

"My Lord, your tutors await your arrival!" A servant outside his door announced.

Westan smiled. He put down the book, put on his crown, and then left his room and headed for the library.

That morning when Lila awoke, it was unseasonably rainy for mid-summer, just like the post man had said it would be. The air was a bit chilly and the sky was very dark. Lila personally liked days like this, as she always felt that rain was quite relaxing. Daphne for her part though did not enjoy the dark sky or loud thunder. Most of the maids also shared her friend's opinion and found the day to be a bit depressing. But Lila enjoyed the soothing sound of the rain echoing throughout the whole castle, and even in the library where they were working at that moment. From the tall glass windows she also watched the heavy downpour outside.

Most everyone else had moved onto another part of the castle while Daphne and she took their sweet time finishing up. But they were almost done now, having just a few more bookshelves to dust. Suddenly though, her friend stopped dusting and turned to Lila anxiously.

"Do you think it is true that the King likes to throw girls with blonde hair into the dungeon? I heard Tam say that earlier." She asked from out of nowhere.

Lila was stunned for a moment. Then she could not help but laugh at her friend's very serious face.

"I am inclined to believe that the King has better reasons for punishing people than because of their looks." She said.

Daphne nodded seriously, letting her words sink in.

"I suppose you are right. Perhaps she was just trying to scare me again." She said with relief.

Lila shook her head. Those girls were really getting on her nerves. If only there was a way to shut them up already! Things were getting worse

ever since Daven, the guard from before, had stopped meeting with Tam after work. He had probably been caught drinking and punished for it, but the other maids seemed to blame the two of them.

"You should not listen to them. What do they know about the King anyways? Honestly, all these rumors are quite tiresome to deal with." She said with a sigh.

"Yes, I am sure you are quite right Lila." Daphne said, calming down a bit.

Honestly, how silly! Lila had seen neither hide nor hair of the King since their arrival, and was unsure he ever roamed about his own castle at this point. Yet these ridiculous rumors never failed to disrupt her days. She really just wanted this all to end already.

Lila let out a sigh as she continued to dust. But just then, a sudden loud noise from a few bookshelves down, similar to the sound a book being shoved back onto a shelf, made them both jump in surprise. Lila was very startled for a moment, because she had not known anyone else was still here. Although she supposed one of the librarians may have come back from their break already.

"Who is to say the King does *not* do such things?" A voice suddenly said from the same direction the noise had come from.

Lila was a little offended that someone had obviously been rudely eavesdropping on their conversation. But she was not about to be made afraid by whoever this was.

"I suppose it is possible that he does. But I have never seen such a thing for myself, so why should I believe in such a ridiculous rumor?" She asked.

"It is just thought to be the wisest course of action in most people's minds." He replied.

"Only a silly person believes every word others say." Lila stated.

The voice suddenly burst out in laughter. "Well, well, I must say that you are quite outspoken, for a servant girl."

Servant girl? Lila suddenly got a strange feeling that she was not talking with a mere librarian after all. She quickly walked out from behind the bookshelf, wondering just who they were dealing with. She saw young man was waiting around the shelf to meet her, standing there with a small book in his hand. He was very handsome, with dark hair and dark eyes, light skin and a good build. He wore a regal blue silk shirt and dark pants, along with a jewel studded crown. Four guards stood nearby him clad in full armor, each watching her warily. This boy was obviously the King, and he was staring at her with a cold smirk.

Lila's heart began to race nervously and she felt her breath catch. Daphne whimpered beside her and held onto her arm tightly and the air became tense. Lila noticed there were also two additional men standing next to the King, an older man and what looked to be his young son. Both of them had curly blonde hair in pony tails, blue eyes, and each wore green tutor clothes. They were quite good looking, especially the son. But the terrified expressions they were wearing reminded Lila of the dire situation she had gotten herself into. She turned back to the King, knowing she had better talk quickly while she still had the chance.

"I suppose you are right about me, but I merely assumed that you are a more reasonable man than the gossip has said." Lila said in the most reasonable way she could manage.

The King's eyebrows shot up with surprise, and he looked strangely intrigued for some reason, as did those standing next to him. Everyone waited in anticipation for what would happen next.

Then the King shook his head and chuckled again.

"Your boldness really is quite astonishing! I do not even remember giving you permission to speak. On top of that, you did not address me with any respect at all." He said, stroking his chin.

Lila was in shock for a second. She had tried her best to remedy the situation, but it seems she just made it worse! Well if that was the case Daphne and she were already doomed, so she might as well try to get out of it again.

"Well to me is sounded as if you were looking for a response, but I do apologize for my hastiness my Lord. Please pardon this country girl for her impudence!" Lila said with a clumsy bow.

The King stared at her with even more interest for a quiet moment. Lila wondered what he was thinking, or more likely, what he was planning to do to them. His eyes were dark and curious, something that reminded her of a hawk stalking prey.

"Are you really not afraid of me girl?" He asked, looking quite curiously.

Lila remained silent, not exactly sure how to respond. Did he *want* her to be afraid? Or was he merely trying to trick her into speaking without his permission again?

Suddenly the King smiled, seeing the frustration in her eyes.

"I will allow you to speak. *This time.*" He said with a laugh.

Lila took a deep breath and stared back at his probing gaze.

"Well, I am resolved not to judge anyone merely by what I have heard others say. Therefore, I do not really know enough about you to make an opinion of fear." She replied, hoping such an answer would be logical and pleasing.

The King cocked his head and examined her with scrutiny.

"But what if I really am as bad as they say? Then what will you do?" He asked with an amused smile.

Lila thought about that seriously for a moment.

"Well, it does not seem like you are to me." She said.

"What do you mean?" He asked with surprise.

"Well if you were as bad as everyone says, then you probably would have had me arrested already." She replied, hoping that answer was reasonable and would not prompt said outcome.

To her surprise, the King suddenly burst out in laughter again. Everyone jumped, and both Lila and Daphne stood frozen where they were. Then he chuckled a little more and came towards her, his four guards watching intently from behind. Lila tensed up but stood her ground, not having anywhere to go anyways.

"What is your name servant girl?" The King asked with crossed arms and a wicked grin.

"Lila." She said quietly, wondering just why he was so interested in speaking with her.

He smiled even more mischievously. "Well, I suppose since you have amused me I will forgive your ignorant disrespect and spare your arrest. For the time being."

Everyone, especially Lila, looked at him with utter shock. Was he actually having fun and *teasing* her right now with such a cruel threat?

Then the King walked passed her and towards the door to leave. The guards exited right behind him, and the father and son tutors followed as well. Both of them looked very relieved that the two of them were alright. The son even glanced her way curiously as he passed, his eyes so blue and thoughtful. But Lila averted her eyes, not able to handle being stared at by such handsome men, even if it was just because of an embarrassing scene.

After they had gone, Lila just stood there for a few moments, mostly confused by what had just happened. But then Daphne turned to her in

anger.

"What were you thinking Lila!?" She whispered.

"What do you mean?" Lila asked.

"You could have gotten us both in big trouble! We could have been killed!" She snapped

"How was I supposed to know that the King was here in the Library and just so happened to be within hearing range of our conversation?" Lila stated, not sure how this was her fault.

Daphne's face was almost red with the beginning of tears now. "You should have just apologized and begged for mercy like a sensible person once you found that he was! Why did you test his patience?"

Lila blushed. She had not thought of that actually.

"I apologize. I suppose I was not thinking." She said honestly.

Daphne was not satisfied with such an answer. She cried most of the day and refused to talk to her at all as they worked. She even ate separate from Lila. Then when they retired to their room things got even worse, as everyone was gathered around the lamp talking about how a maid had boldly talked to the King in the library without getting into trouble. Lila was greatly perplexed on how such news could travel so fast, especially when there had not been that many people present! Who had spread such talk? The guards or tutors perhaps?

One of the maids scoffed. "I bet you she will be arrested before the night is up."

Tam just shook her head. "Well that will serve her right! Just who does she think she is?"

"Poor thing..." Yet another girl said.

Lila feared that Daphne would expose her to the group out of anger. But she didn't say anything to anyone, and even got into bed early that night.

Lila followed her lead, hoping she would wake up tomorrow and find out that her afternoon had just been a bad dream of some sort.

That night Westan could hardly wait to hear what Mr. Jameson and Bartholomew thought about the events in the library that afternoon. As they were leaving the library after his studies that afternoon, he had overheard some servants speaking about him. Westan only intended to scare the girls a little, just for a quick laugh. But how much more interesting the conversation turned out to be! He started discussing it as soon as supper was over.

"What are your thoughts on that servant girl today? Was she not interesting?" He asked curiously.

Mr. Jameson cleared his throat and replied first.

"Well, I was glad you were not displeased with her. She seems to be a good girl, but she gave me quite a fright." He said with a nervous laugh.

Westan frowned. It was not like he would actually have thrown the girls into prison for no good reason! He had merely been teasing them a bit, just for a little fun.

Bartholomew spoke up next.

"I think she was rather incredible! She spoke so boldly, although I think she did do so with respect and dignity. A fine example of outspokenness if I ever saw one." He said with a slight grin.

Westan's agitation quickly melted. Bartholomew always seemed to see the good in everyone, a trait he was coming to feel quite fond of.

Just then Westan remembered the girl's humorous face, and he chuckled again. Honestly, would it kill her to try taming that hair? It looked like a brush had never touched it before! She looked so wild, and her personality seemed to fit.

"I must say that I have never seen hair so red or so many freckles on a person before. What an appearance she has!" Westan said with another laugh.

Bartholomew also chuckled.

"Well, I do not think her looks are unbecoming. Rather, I think such features give Miss Lila a certain charm." He replied.

Westan nodded. "Indeed. How glad I am that the rain prevented us from using the garden today, else we would have missed the opportunity to meet such an amusing girl!"

Indeed, amusing certainly was the right word for her. When Westan had surprised the maids earlier, he really thought they might gravel and beg for mercy like most people did. But instead the servant girl stood her ground and even tried to reason with him! Normally he might have been offended by such actions, but her calm and almost brave manner truly intrigued him far more than. The way her eyebrows betrayed her feelings so easily, and how hard she clearly had to struggle to keep her words under control truly was too entertaining to pass up. Such a feisty temper only made Westan picture her as some kind of wild and proud horse. She just had her own thoughts about everything! He was not sure whether he had ever met anyone quite like her before.

By the end of the night Westan was feeling quite jolly. He had not had so much fun in a long while! Ever since his new tutors had come everything had been getting more fun. He definitely hoped to see the servant girl and have some fun again. Perhaps he could even find a way to scare her.

Lila was relieved to say the least, when the next morning actually came as it did every day. She lay awake all last night wondering if guards really were going to barge in and arrest her. But thankfully nothing happened, and she felt even more relieved when Daphne finally spoke to her again.

The two of them were dusting alone once again in the library, having let the group move ahead so they could talk. Lila even made sure to check all around the nearby bookshelves to ensure no one was eavesdropping, but she still felt the need to glance back over her shoulder a dozen times.

"I am sorry for being angry, but I was just so terrified yesterday! All I could think of was getting thrown into prison and leaving my brothers and sisters to fend for themselves!" Daphne whispered extra quietly.

"I am sorry too. I should not have been so bold and arrogant; I should have behaved better." Lila replied as quietly as she could.

Daphne smiled. "I know Lila; I believe you are sorry. I also forgive you. Just please, think next time you are in such a delicate situation!"

Lila nodded. "Indeed I shall have to. I barely got any sleep last night, wondering if what I had said to the King had indeed been foolish."

Her friend gulped. "Me too. I feared greatly for our safety."

Lila just nodded again, and then the two of them hugged and were friends once more. The day progressed slowly after that, with the two of them going back to talking like normal as they cleaned. At about noon their group went to east end of the castle to sweep the large garden hallway. All

the maids were chatting and enjoying the sunshine after the previous day's rainy weather.

"Ahhh! I sure do love summer, such lovely weather!" One of the girls said with a sigh.

"Indeed. Although, I think the best view today is of the stable boys." Another woman giggled as she pointed outside.

Everyone laughed as they went over to the window to gaze outside. Lila just rolled her eyes. She did not care to ogle unsuspecting men. Although, she would have liked to go and see how the flowers in the garden were blooming. This time of year was perfect to watch the plants. They were so lively and vibrant, so full of wonder and life. As soon as fall came they would wither away and die, retreating until the next rainy spring.

Lila sighed. She was missing her life on the farm right now. Every morning during the summer she would run down to the stream and take a short swim. Then she would go back home and water the plants, picking anything that was ripe along the way. Afterwards she would cook supper and jar fruits and vegetables to keep for the winter. When the day was done and the sun began to set, she would race back down to the stream for another dip in the nice cool water. Lila missed such fun activities back home, especially being able to go for a swim on a hot day like this. Honestly, these maid uniforms were positively suffocating and the halls held no breeze!

Just then, Lila heard a few shouts coming from the end of the hallway where the garden was. Both Daphne and she looked around with worry. All the maids suddenly dropped what they were doing and rushed over to the wall and stood there nervously, so the two of them followed. Neither of them was really sure of what was going on, but there was no time to ask questions it seemed. Everyone fell silent, and the rustling leaves of trees

outside could be heard throughout the echoing hall. It was then that Lila heard many footsteps coming. She carefully risked a peek, wondering what all the commotion could be for. To her surprise she saw the King and his small entourage walking their way.

Lila's jaw dropped. Was this really happening right now?

As the group came closer everyone bowed, and Lila bent a little lower, trying to hide her face from the King in case she should catch his attention. Not that she thought he would actually speak to her a second time. But still, there was no harm in being extra careful.

Everyone stayed in their positions quietly, waiting for them to pass. Lila could hear that the footsteps were almost upon them. There were seven pairs of steps, which probably meant the same four guards and two tutors were in the group. She really hoped none of them noticed her either!

Lila held her breath as the first pair of feet, which belonged to the King, advance towards her. Everyone near her was completely silent, and Daphne was nearly shaking again. Lila took a deep breath and tried to calm herself.

Everything was going to be okay, they were just going to pass by! There was no way they would even remember a nobody like her!

Lila looked up just slightly to watch as they came closer. The King's steps suddenly slowed down when he was just a few feet away from her, then he came to a halt. She felt her breath catch as his entourage also stopped almost right in front of her. Then Lila watched with astonishment as the King's very expensive pair of leather boots came within her vision.

"Well, well, miss servant girl. Fancy seeing you again." She heard the young King say with a chuckle.

Lila held back a groan and did not even dare glance at any of the many surprised faces that were forming on the faces of all those nearby. She just bowed a bit lower in acknowledgment of his greeting.

"You may rise." The King said, sounding amused already.

Lila wished to remain facing the floor as she was, but she reluctantly obeyed and raised her head. She even faked a polite smile, really hoping this would all end well just as the day before.

It was quiet for a moment as the King just stared at her with intrigue. This time Lila noticed the tutor's son behind him, that he was staring intently at her as well. She averted her gaze from both pairs of probing eyes.

"What, nothing feisty to say today? I just assumed you had some opinion to share with me." The King suddenly said with a smile.

Lila felt her heart flutter nervously. She had to be more careful with her words this time! She did not want to test him a second time and risk punishment. Besides, all the maids' eyes were on her at that moment.

"What would my Lord like to hear?" She asked politely.

The King tilted his head and examined. Then after a few seconds he frowned, obviously not pleased.

"What a shame, you are just as I thought after all." He said with a disappointed sigh.

Lila frowned. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Daphne squeezed her arm again, and Lila put her hand over her mouth with a gasp. But it was too late, the words had already been spoken.

The King suddenly formed a genuinely entertained smile.

"Oh, I was just starting to think that maybe you really were a coward after all, despite your brave talk before." He said with a chuckle.

Lila was again surprised by another unfair comment of his.

"Surely I must speak or be silent, yet you have not been happy with either!" She replied defensively, unsure of his reasoning.

The King burst out in surprised laughter, both of the tutor's eyes bulged, everyone else gasped, and Daphne pinched her arm in anger.

Lila sighed quietly. She had no control over her mouth sometimes.

"I-I meant no disrespect your Majesty, I am just confused." She added quickly.

The King smiled. "Well I see you can indeed be feisty with a bit of coaxing."

Lila's eyebrows shot up with surprise. She suddenly wondered if he was saying all these things *just* to see how she would react.

The King examined her and then laughed. "If you have something you wish to say, please express it to the rest of us."

Lila blushed. She forgot that her face practically expressed its own words. She had to be careful to control her expressions around him too!

"I-I am just honored your Highness remembered a servant girl like me." She lied.

He chuckled. "Well, it was easy to recognize you by your wild red hair. I saw you from down the hall."

Lila frowned. How embarrassing to be remembered by the King because of her ridiculous hair. And how rude for him to say such a thing to a girl!

The King smiled in amusement and looked at her curiously. "What is it now?"

She shook her head and looked away. "Well, to be told I am remembered by the King only because of wild hair is quite embarrassing."

He raised an eyebrow. "I see. Very well, then shall I remember you by your freckles instead?"

Lila frowned even more. Why was he saying such unkind things and being so irritating?

"You are being very rude!" She snapped, feeling extremely flustered.

The King started laughing quite hard for a moment. He was really enjoying himself it seems. But Lila was ready to just kick herself! Why could she not seem to keep her mouth shut at all around this man? It was like he was trying to frustrate her! Even the tutor's son was grinning and seemed amused by her spectacle now.

"I suppose you may be right, but I cannot seem to help myself. You are just too interesting!" The King said with another chuckle.

Lila flushed deep red again. Was she really so unusual that the King has taken such notice of her like this? Why could he not simply forget her face and leave her alone already?

"Well, well, your Majesty is having fun I see." A new voice suddenly said.

The King's face lit up with surprise and he suddenly spun around to where the voice had come from.

"Zacchaeus, I did not see you there." He said, sounding caught off guard and a little embarrassed.

A man, one tall and weasel like, walked over to him from the opposite hallway accompanied by two guards. His eyes were cold and wary, and his expression was smug. Lila knew right away she did not like whoever he was.

He bowed before the King. "I am only coming to check on your tutors. I hope they are doing a fine job."

The King nodded. "Yes, I am very pleased with their work."

Both of tutors bowed and blushed bashfully in response. It was then that Lila noticed just how very handsome the boy was, especially when he smiled and his cheeks were slightly pink. He must have sensed her gaze, for he quickly turned and looked her way. Their eyes met briefly, but she

immediately turned away with furious embarrassment and went back to staring at the ground.

The tall man nodded. "That is good to hear. But sire, may I request a brief audience with you in my office?"

The King's face fell and looked a little pale, although he tried to hide it. Lila was quite surprised by this. Just who could intimidate the very intimidating King?

"Yes of course Zacchaeus. We shall go immediately." The King replied.

Then he turned back towards his tutors.

"You are dismissed for the day then Mr. Jameson, Bartholomew." He said, nodding to each one as he said their name.

Then he suddenly turned to face her with a mischievous smile.

"Good day Miss Red Hair." He said in a most rude tone of voice.

Lila had to fight back an angry glare as he turned and walked away. Everyone then bowed and remained quiet as the King walked away, the man Zacchaeus and all the guards following. No one dared to move until they were completely out of sight. Then there were just the maids and tutors left in the hall.

Lila wondered if she could possibly run away before anyone had time to question her about today's events. She dared to look up from the ground and saw all eyes were still on her.

Lila sighed. So her peaceful life here at the castle had been completely ruined thanks to that selfish and childish boy of a King! Now how was she supposed to go about her day quietly? There was sure to be endless questions and gossip about her until the day she died!

Lila took her broom and began sweeping again, eyes solely on her work so as to avoid everyone's stares. But the boy, whose name was Bartholomew, suddenly approached her.

"Miss, may we speak with you for a moment?" He asked with a pleasantly charming voice.

Lila stopped sweeping and turned toward his direction.

"What is it sir?" She asked, eyes still glued to the floor.

"I just wish to commend you. Your boldness is quite admirable." He said with smile in his voice.

Lila nodded in response. "Th-thank you for your compliment."

"Yes, you spoke for yourself quite well both yesterday and today." The father, Mr. Jameson said.

Lila held back another groan. Great! Now everyone really would know it had been her who spoke with the King yesterday. Not that there was much doubt left in anyone's mind.

Lila finally looked up from the ground, not wanting to be too rude to men so close to the King. The son met her gaze and smiled. Then he cleared his throat awkwardly.

"My father and I are the King's tutors. Well actually, I am just the assistant. We are here from Darbish." He said cheerfully.

"I see. Well, that must be an interesting job." She replied politely.

The boy gazed into her eyes and smiled the most handsome smile she had ever seen.

"Indeed, it is sometimes." He said.

Lila quickly looked back down at her broom and began sweeping again, too embarrassed to keep up the conversation any longer.

"Well, we do not wish to keep you from your work. We should be getting back to our own in fact." Mr. Jameson said graciously.

"Yes, I apologize for the delay. But it was very nice to meet you Miss Lila. We bid you good-day." Bartholomew said, extending a small bow to her.

"T-Thank you sirs. Good-day to you." She said bashfully, bowing in return.

Both men then walked away. Lila watched them from the corner of her eye until they could no longer be seen. She immediately felt relieved as they left, for she had been quite nervous in their presence, especially because the handsome man Bartholomew seemed to stare at her so much! Daphne had been there right next to her and *she* was the one who was by all means gorgeous, so why had he not gazed towards her as well? Lila wondered if she was really so strange and funny looking that everyone liked to just stare in amazement at her.

"OH MY! So that was *you* the other day Lila!" One of the other maids exclaimed.

Lila closed her eyes and groaned aloud. She had forgotten that so many others had witnessed that.

"Why did you not say something before?" Another asked with indignation.

"I cannot believe it! The way you talked to the King, and he did not even punish you! This is all so amazing..." Still another girl said with awe.

"Look, nothing special happened! We were just talking!" Lila snapped.

She really did not want this to be blown out of proportion, even though it was probably far too late.

"Come now, we had all better finish up." Daphne suddenly said with a nervous laugh.

Everyone immediately snapped back to their senses and returned to their day's work, although they started gossiping as they did so, and they didn't even try to hide it.

Lila sighed and walked away from the rest of them until she was out of hearing range. She didn't want to know what kind of crazy stories they were

already concocting! Daphne soon came over to her side and began to sweep as well.

"Do not worry about them, they are just silly gossipers." She said with a small smile.

Lila turned to Daphne with surprise. She was not angry with her this time? Well, perhaps her friend was more ease because the King seemed more like he was just teasing today. And the kind words from Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson afterwards may have helped too.

"I guess there is no point in worrying now since the damage is done. I just hope this does not get out of hand." Lila groaned.

Daphne nodded in agreement. Then she started sweeping again, a strange grin suddenly forming on her face.

"By the way, it seems to me that boy may like you." She giggled.

"Who do you mean?" Lila asked stupidly, knowing full well whom she meant.

"Why Mister Bartholomew of course!" Daphne replied.

Lila blushed at the mention of his name, and at the thought of such a handsome boy even possibly liking someone like her. But she shook her head and looked away.

"He was just being polite. Besides, I do not even know him." She said.

"But he talked only with you the whole time, and he did not seem like he wanted to leave!" Daphne giggled again.

Lila frowned. That was probably because she was so *amusing* to watch. She was just here for the laughs it seemed.

"I am sure you are mistaken. Now come on, let us finish up here already." She sighed quietly.

Daphne nodded but still looked convinced of her theory. Lila just tried to forget the whole matter and get on with her work. She knew there would

probably be no peace for her tonight, and possibly never again.

Chapter 07- Now the Trouble Begins

Westan entered into his council man's office hesitantly. Zacchaeus only ever called him in here when they had an important matter to discuss, or when he was in trouble.

Westan gazed around the room again. He never really liked coming in here. It was very spacious, with richly decorated furniture and gold emblems lining one wall to another, but the large window's drapes were constantly drawn closed so candle light was needed no matter the time of day. Overall the whole room felt gloomy and suffocating.

Once Zacchaeus entered, he dismissed the guards and closed the doors. After which he walked over to his desk and sat down in a tall gold chair. Then he gestured for Westan to sit in the chair facing him, which he obediently did.

"My Lord, did I actually just witness you conversing with servants in the hall today?" The man asked with disappointment.

Westan blushed and shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"Wh-what is wrong with that Zacchaeus?" He asked.

The man sighed loudly and rubbed his forehead, something he often did whenever they talked. It was the biggest sign of his disapproval.

"It is not proper for a King to speak informally with such unworthy people!" He said.

"Why should I not be able to talk to my own servants when I please?" Westan replied defensively.

Zacchaeus laughed and shook his head. "What business could you possibly have with them?"

Westan shrugged. "They can make for some good entertainment when I am bored."

His council man put his arms on the desk and folded his hands together, staring at Westan closely.

"Such impudent people are so far beneath you your majesty. The only interactions you should be having with servants is when they are taking your orders, or with your tutors when they are conducting your studies. Speaking of which, they were late starting your lesson today, were they not?" He asked.

Westan looked up with shame. "A-Actually it was my fault. I asked them to join me for lunch."

Zacchaeus shook his head and sighed even louder. Westan's cheeks went pink, so he looked back down at his fidgeting hands, too embarrassed to look his council man in the eyes any longer. He had clearly disappointed him, *again*.

"My Lord, try and remember that you must be very cautious. You cannot lower your guard too far with these servants! Remember, these are the same type of people who betrayed your parents." Zacchaeus said harshly.

Westan felt a lump in his throat. Perhaps he already had let his guard down, seeing as he was inviting Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson to supper every night. He wondered if Zacchaeus knew that or not.

His council man suddenly stood up and came over to him. He bent down over Westan and put a hand on his shoulder.

"This is for your own protection your Majesty. I do not want anyone getting dangerously close to you." He said.

Westan nodded. "Yes Zacchaeus, I understand..."

Zacchaeus smiled. "Very good. Now, how about you eat supper by yourself tonight. I think you need some time to meditate on your actions."

Westan blushed with embarrassment. So he *did* know about it then!

"Of course, if you think that is wise." He said.

The man nodded. "Your father would be proud of your mature understanding."

Westan looked away with shame. He doubted that very much. It seemed he never did anything right!

"Very well, now that such a mess has been dealt with, I have much work to return to." Zacchaeus said, sitting back down in his chair.

Without another word Westan stood up and quickly left the office. He rushed back to his chambers and slammed the door shut angrily. Then he flopped down on his bed miserably, putting a pillow over his head.

Just why did he have to be a King? He never got to have any fun! He never got to go anywhere! He never got to do anything! Rules and tradition seemed to dictate everything he was supposed to do and think! And now he was not even allowed to enjoy the company of his paid servants?

Westan roared loudly and threw the pillow aside with frustration. Paid servants, that's all Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson really were in the end he supposed. The only reason they were truly here was to work and earn their money! It is not as if they would stay here without such incentives, or keep him company for reasons other than their work.

Westan lay back down on his bed miserably and sighed. He really hated being King!

That night before Lila entered her room, she promised herself that no rumor the maids or servants came up with would make her leave this job. But now she wasn't so sure.

"Well, well, if is not the horse faced seductress." Tam greeted with smirk.

Lila rolled her eyes. "What are you talking about? All I did was answer the King when he addressed me."

She giggled. "Yes but he mentioned speaking to you the other day, which means you are trying to make yourself quite noticeable. And then when the King left your presence you so quickly moved to speaking with the young tutor!"

Lila blushed more wildly then she ever had before.

"W-What is that supposed to mean?" She demanded.

Tam crossed her arms. "Oh Lila, it is so obvious that you so desperately wish to seduce the King or his well to do tutor. Poor Lila, to think you would stoop so low just for some attention."

Lila scowled. "I have done no such thing nor do I ever have any intention of doing so!"

Tam scoffed. "Lila *everyone* saw you today."

"Yeah Lila, we were there too!" One girl said.

"Why are you trying to hide it now? Just face it already!" Another girl said.

Lila couldn't even believe it! Were these girls honestly choosing *this* as their gossip topic? It was even worse than she could have imagined!

Tam shook her head. "Lila, no man would ever fall for your pathetic charms or plain looks you know. Least of all someone as handsome and rich as the King or his tutor."

Lila clenched her hand into a fist, ready to punch this girl as hard as she could. But Daphne grabbed her by the arm.

"Lila, just ignore them and get some sleep. They are not worth it!" She said gently.

Lila let out a long sigh and relaxed her hand. Her friend was right, that was probably the best thing to do. There was no point in starting a fight and getting sent home over such silly rumors.

As they climbed in bed that night the rest of the girls stayed up gossiping about her loudly, making up their own tales and motives and laughing the whole time. Lila just put her pillow over her head and tried to drown out their silly talk.

But the next day things were even worse. Tam took pride in leading the gossip to every corner of the castle, spreading it to every and any person she knew. Every time Lila passed by someone they giggled or started whispering about her. Sometimes the maids shouted foul names or even threatened to throw the mop water at her. Truly, she had never been so humiliated in her whole life.

But Lila refused to give up on this job, since her father's health depended in the money she was earning here. So she continued to ignore the gossip as best she could, for the sake of her father. Daphne had been a lifesaver in all this, as she chose to stick by her side and remain kind despite being dragged into some of the rumors with her.

Eventually though, after about three weeks, the amazement of Lila's actions wore off and the gossip seemed to pass. New topics and stories were always catching people's attention, so her own was quickly forgotten. Soon it all but faded away, nearly like it had never even happened before. Lila even felt like things might go back to normal for her. Even so, Daphne and she preferred to continue working separate from the rest of the maids. It

was an easy task, as they would simply move on to the next job before everyone else. Solitude was a small price to pay in order to avoid such embarrassing drama again.

Today they had finished the west hallway in a timely fashion, so the two of them had moved ahead of the other maids to the library. So far it had been a very quiet day, with some light rain outside, adding greatly to the very peaceful and relaxing atmosphere.

"Lila, shall I go and get some fresh water?" Daphne suddenly asked, breaking the almost deafening silence.

Lila turned and looked down at the bucket of mop water. She frowned at its black appearance.

"Perhaps you should. I will just finish dusting until you get back." She replied.

Daphne nodded and headed towards the cleaning room down the hall outside. As she left the room, Lila grabbed her duster and began wiping areas they had not previously cleaned. As she neared the end of a long table stacked high with books, she noticed a spot at the top of one of the bookshelves that had been missed. In fact, it looked to have been collecting dust for weeks!

Lila frowned. She did not want to get in trouble or be docked any pay for other people's laziness! What would it hurt these maids to climb a few steps and finish a job anyhow?

Lila grabbed a ladder and leaned it against the shelf. It was a bit rickety, but it would do well enough. Slowly she began climbing the unsteady steps, making sure to get as high as she safely could. However, her duster was no longer enough to reach the top shelf so she climbed all the way back down and grabbed a broom instead. Perhaps *this* was why the maids never cleaned it.

Now, with the broom's extended reach, Lila was indeed able to reach the top shelf. She gave it a brush and swept it all off in one fell swoop. The debris immediately flew up into the air and formed a thick cloud that almost instantly engulfed her. Lila could not help but cough as the old dust quickly filled her lungs and clouded her vision. She tried to turn away until it dissipated, but it was making her cough so hard that she feared losing her grip. Lila quickly tried to make her way back down the ladder to escape the dust. Unfortunately, one last cough was all it took to make her hands slip.

Lila thrust out her arm, hoping to break her fall so as to avoid hitting her head. But before she made it to where the ground was, a pair of arms wrapped around her, miraculously catching her from the fall. The two of them fell back and bumped into the next bookshelf, the person behind almost losing their own footing in the process.

"Oh dear, I am so very sorry!" Lila said with another cough, looking back to see just who had saved her.

A familiar pair of worried blue eyes met her gaze.

"Are you alright Miss Lila?" The young tutor's son Bartholomew asked with concern.

Lila blushed. She quickly got out of the boy's arms and turned around completely to face him.

"Y-yes I am just fine! Thank you for catching me, I apologize for your fall!" She said with furious embarrassment.

She could not believe it! Why *him* of all people? Just when she thought this nonsense was all behind her too!

The boy shook his head. "I am just glad I was here so that you did not get hurt."

"T-thank you again. I am just so clumsy sometimes..." Lila said, blushing still.

She quickly looked around the room nervously for any onlookers. Much to her relief though, Lila saw that the King was not present with the tutor, or anyone else for that matter. Good! Then at least she would not have to deal with any nonsense. But wait, Daphne was not here either, which meant Bartholomew and her were all alone!

Lila blushed again, wondering what kind of gossip the maids would come up with if they saw her like this now. She hoped *he* had not heard any of the rumors!

"How have you been Miss Lila?" Bartholomew suddenly asked with a smile.

"Oh, well, the same as ever I suppose." She replied vaguely, hoping he would quickly lose interest in their conversation.

He laughed at her annoyance. "So is that good or bad then?"

"Oh neither good nor bad really. Just alright I guess." Lila said honestly.

Bartholomew laughed again, such a nice sound to be heard.

"H-how have you been?" She decided to ask in return for the sake of merely being polite.

He shrugged and faked her tone of voice. "Oh, the same as ever."

Lila found herself smiling at his tease.

"I-Is that bad or good?" She asked, playing along.

Bartholomew chuckled. "I find that I am quite enjoying my time here at the castle."

"I sure wish *I* could say the same." Lila replied, rolling her eyes.

He frowned. "Oh, is something wrong?"

She shook her head and crossed her arms with a sigh.

"It is just not so easy when unexpected and embarrassing things happen to you." She said, thinking of none other than the mischievous King.

Bartholomew smiled with amusement. "Indeed. But I find that is what makes life so interesting."

Lila sighed. "I suppose you are right. Still, I would prefer for things to remain mostly calm if possible."

He raised an eyebrow. "Really? Most people would want at least a little excitement in their life."

She rolled her eyes again. "Some things are *too* exciting."

He tried to hold back a chuckle. "Yes, I suppose that is true. But you seem to handle unexpected situations quite well you know. I am thoroughly impressed by how well you maintain your composure."

Lila looked away with wild embarrassment and nodded. "Th-thank you."

For a moment it was awkwardly quiet, so Bartholomew looked away and examined the surrounding area curiously.

"By the way, what are you doing cleaning here all by yourself?" He asked with concern.

"Well my friend Daphne was here too, she just went to get some more mop water a bit ago." She explained.

"Oh, I see now. That is good to hear." Bartholomew replied, looking relieved by her answer.

"What are you doing here today?" Lila asked, curious as to why he was alone too.

Bartholomew's face fell, and he looked extremely uncomfortable all of a sudden.

"Well, I am doing some research actually. The King did not want to have his studies today so I had some spare time on my hands. I was just a few shelves away when I heard you coughing earlier." He explained quickly.

Lila was quite curious about his unusual expression.

"Is there any way I could help you find what you are looking for?" She asked.

Bartholomew frowned. "No Miss Lila that will not be necessary. Thank you for your offer, but I do not wish to hold up your own work."

Lila nodded with understanding. Whatever he was doing, it seemed he did not wish to disclose any details to her. And why would he? It's not like it was any of her business.

"Excuse me, I must be going." He said abruptly.

Lila nodded as he bowed politely before turning and walking away. After a moment, when the shock of everything wore off, she got her duster and got back to work, wondering if Daphne had just decided to go all the way to the sea to fill her bucket. Honestly! What was taking her so long?

"Excuse me, Miss Lila." Bartholomew suddenly said from behind her.

Lila jumped and turned around with surprise.

"Y-yes?" She said, a bit startled to see him again.

"I apologize. I did not mean to be short with you a moment ago. It was very rude of me to leave so quickly." He said in an apologetic tone.

"Oh, I did not think you were being rude. You seem to be busy right now so I do not mind if you must go." Lila replied, shocked by his worry.

Bartholomew smiled, truly looking relieved.

"Thank you, I appreciate your understanding." He said.

She nodded. "There is no need to thank me. We all have our worries to deal with."

He nodded and gazed at her for a moment, looking thoughtful.

"Indeed. Although, I hope there is nothing distressing you at the moment." He said.

Lila laughed. "Well, it is nothing apart from all the other maids here, or yourself for that matter. We are all here to make a living."

Bartholomew nodded. "True. But I do hope this job has not been *too* troublesome for you."

She shook her head. "It is just a big change from what I am used to. I grew up on a farm out in the country, so castle and city here are all new to me. Besides that, I really miss my father some days."

"Oh, he is back home I presume?" He asked curiously.

Lila nodded, this time a bit solemnly. She almost forgot some days that he was sick at home waiting for her to return. Truly, she missed him and the comforts of home, especially amidst all these embarrassing encounters.

"Indeed. He has been suffering with an illness as of late and the doctors and medicine he needs is expensive. I have come here to work until I can pay for it all. But I plan to return home and visit him soon as soon as I can." She explained.

Bartholomew looked quite upset by her words, his eyes easily betraying his deep concern.

"I am very sorry to hear all that Miss Lila. I had no idea..." He said.

Lila suddenly gave a small laugh in an effort to lighten the mood. She certainly had not meant to disclose so much. It seemed she had gotten carried away talking again. She supposed though that it had merely been nice to talk to someone so understanding and thoughtful. Lila did not even like speaking these things to Daphne, for fear she would burden her friend down with such worries.

"There is no need to be sorry. As long as I just keep working as hard as I can things will work out well enough." She said.

Bartholomew smiled at her confidence. "Well I have no doubt you can do it. You seem to be the kind of girl who can do anything she puts her mind to."

Lila blushed and looked down at her feet. This boy, he was just so very polite and charming! Why again was he wasting his time talking to someone as boring as her right now?

Just then, she saw Bartholomew reach into his pocket and pull something out. Then he took her hand and placed a small coin purse in it.

"Here, for your father." He said gently.

Lila gasped with shock.

"No, I could not possibly! I assure you, there is no need to trouble yourself!" She said, holding it back out to him.

"It is no trouble really. Please, I insist you allow me to do this." Bartholomew said with a kind smile, putting his arms behind his back.

Lila blushed horribly, but she was not too proud to accept such a generous gift, especially if it meant helping her father. So she quickly put the small pouch in her pocket.

"I do not know what to say. I am so grateful..." She replied quietly.

"Again, it is no trouble at all. I am happy to help in any way I can. Besides, I do not want you to work yourself *too* hard now Miss Lila." He said softly.

Lila had to look down at her feet again to hide the rose red color her face was at that moment. First he had saved her from a fall, and now this! Just how was she ever going to pay him back?

"T-thank you again!" She replied, having to hold back tears of relief.

Bartholomew smiled. "You are very welcome. I wish your father a swift recovery. But please excuse me now, as I really must be going."

Lila nodded as he bowed and left. She watched his back until he reached the library door. But as he turned to leave down the hallway, he glanced back at her. Lila blushed wildly and quickly looked away as their eyes met again, although she thought she might have seen him smile.

"Oh my!" Daphne's voice suddenly said from somewhere nearby.

Lila jumped in surprise. She turned and looked behind the bookshelf they had fallen against. Daphne was standing there holding the bucket of clean water, a big smile imprinted on her face.

"That was Mister Bartholomew leaving, was it not? He came and spoke with you again!" She exclaimed.

"We were just talking. It is nothing!" Lila protested with furious embarrassment.

Daphne shook her head with a raised eyebrow. "I am not so sure about that."

Lila sighed and looked away. Her friend was nearly as bad as the maids some days! Suddenly though she remembered the coin purse, so she pulled it out and looked inside. About twenty or so gold pieces were contained.

Daphne's jaw dropped. "W-where did you get that?"

"Bartholomew just gave me this to use for my father's medicine. But I had no idea it was so much..." Lila replied, still in shock herself.

Her friend's jaw dropped. "He did what now!?"

Lila shook her head with disbelief. "I am just as surprised as you!"

Just then Daphne giggled and smacked her shoulder.

"See, he does like you! Why else would he do such a thing?" She declared.

Lila puffed out her chest defensively.

"Maybe he is just a kind and generous person!" She retorted.

Her friend giggled again. "*Maybe.*"

Lila rolled her eyes and turned away. Then she pulled out the coins and quickly counted them. Twenty-two gold pieces exactly. He must make good money as the King's tutor indeed! No wonder everyone thought she might be trying to seduce him.

Lila turned to Daphne and took her hand, placing half of the money with her.

"I have more than enough now to catch up on our debts and pay for my father to see a doctor. Send the rest to your family." She said.

Daphne's face turned red and she almost started crying right then. She gave Lila a big hug, and the two of them quickly went back to work. After they finished their assignments both of them ran to the post to send the money back home. Daphne even decided to pay for another letter. Her friend was nearly in tears the whole time.

Lila would really have to pay Bartholomew back for his generosity someday. Although there probably wasn't much someone like her could do for him.

About two days later Lila received a letter from Maryann and her father. He was doing well, but said he missed her terribly. He thought since she had made enough money to pay for some medicine and a doctor that it would be alright for her to come home now.

Lila sighed. It wasn't that easy, and he knew it. She still had to make sure they could afford such things until he could fully recover! He would just have to make do with Maryann's company until then, something Lila was not unhappy about. She returned to the postman and sent a letter back home, saying that she was fine, the job was exciting, and that nothing bad had happened to her so he could stop worrying already! Then she thanked Maryann for her help, told her father how much she loved him, and about visiting as soon as she could. Lila hoped that would be enough to put him at ease for now.

The next time Lila cleaned the library, and every time after that she hoped to run into Bartholomew again. She truly wanted to thank him properly and tell him how much the money had helped both Daphne and

herself, as she was sure he would appreciate such news. However, she had not come across him again even once in the weeks that passed. She supposed that he was just very busy with the King's studies, as such a client was probably difficult and quite demanding. She hoped though to see him when he next had free time.

"That is enough, I am tired!" Westan snapped, pushing a pile of books off the table.

Everyone in the study room was startled by the noise. Mr. Jameson gazed at him warily.

"V-very well sire, as you wish. We can conclude for the day." He said with a bow.

"Good." Westan grumbled as he stood up to leave.

Ever since his talked with Zacchaeus he had been finding it hard to focus on his sessions. He could not even sit out in the garden anymore, as his council man said it was against tradition. Now Westan was cooped back up in the library again, feeling just as frustrated as before!

"My Lord, you looked quite vexed today. Is there anything we can do for you?" Bartholomew asked gently.

He looked at the boy and saw his eyes were full of true concern. But Westan was not supposed to discuss anything other than his studies with his teachers, so he just turned away and left the room, completely ignoring Bartholomew for the hundredth time. He decided to go out to the garden

and take a ride with Dark Oak before the sun set. Afterwards he returned to his chambers for the night, eating supper alone once more.

Westan lay on his bed that evening and sighed. He truly did not know what to do! These sessions with the tutors were becoming increasingly difficult for him. He felt trapped when they came together for his lessons as he was forced to treat them so indifferently when he really just wanted things to go back to way they were before! But that wasn't even a possibility now.

Westan lay there for a while thinking of what to do, but suddenly a knock came at his door and interrupted his thoughts.

"Your Majesty, Lord Zacchaeus is here to see you!" One of the guards announced.

Westan immediately jumped up and ran to the door. Zacchaeus was here to see him? So late at night? Could it be to see how he was doing?

He quickly opened it and smiled at his council man.

"Zacchaeus! Wh-what are you doing here?" He asked, quite excited to see him so unexpectedly.

The man bowed. "Sire, I come with important news."

"Yes, what is it?" He asked curiously.

His council man sighed and shook his head. "Well, unfortunately it pertains to your tutors."

Chapter 08- From Bad to Worse

The next day was a bit cloudy, with a slight chill in the air. Lila had been tossing and turning all night with bad dreams, and this weather certainly was not helping her feel better. She even put on an extra layer of undergarments that morning before skulking off to work. The day progressed slowly after that, with everyone feeling quite sluggish.

"Oh dear, I do hope the sun comes out soon." Daphne said sadly as they were mopping the west wing.

"Me too! For this rain is positively depressing!" Another maid replied.

"Indeed, for we cannot even see the stable boys today." Someone else joked.

All the girls began to giggle, except for Lila who was sick of such inappropriate talk. She just wanted to get her work done and get back to bed! It probably would be a long day though, as everyone was moving slowly and wasting time on silly jokes.

At about noon a glimmer of sun started to peek through the clouds. But just before lunch came around they heard some shouting coming from the end of the hall. Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked to where the commotion was stemming from. Lila caught sight of a young girl running towards them with an absolutely terrified expression on her face.

"Everyone, everyone! Did you hear?" She exclaimed with tears when she reached them.

"What is it Isabella?" A blonde haired woman asked with worry.

"Why, the King tutors have been thrown into the dungeon for treason!" She said with a fearful face.

Lila's heart skipped a beat and her drowsiness wore off immediately. The King's tutors? Did she mean *Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson*?

"Where did you hear such news?" Lila asked the girl.

"From Lizzy! She works in the kitchen, but her husband knows the dungeon patrol guard. She says he told her last night after he witnessed the two men being imprisoned for himself!" The girl explained in rush.

"I heard that this morning too, but I was not sure whether to believe it or not. After all, Amanda usually never gets the details right." Another girl replied.

Lila's face paled. Was this just another silly rumor? Or could this terrible news possibly be true?

"But why? Why would this happen?" Lila asked the girl with increased worry.

Isabella shrugged. "Apparently they were caught trying to kill the King. Or at least the evidence pointed to an assassination attempt."

Daphne gasped and the rest of the women started whispering among themselves. Some believed it, others didn't. Lila was still just in shock.

"No, it just cannot be true!" She exclaimed after a moment.

Daphne nodded. "Like you always say, it is probably all false anyways. Surely those men could not have had such malicious motives!"

Lila licked her lips nervously. Her friend was right. There was no way they would do such a thing! She was aware that she had not known them long, but Bartholomew was such a kind and genuine person and seemed to the utmost most respect for the King. So why would he do such a thing?

But then again, that day Lila had seen Bartholomew in the library, she had sensed that he was trying to hide something. She just assumed it was related to family or personal problems, but now she was not so sure.

Maybe, as hard as it was for her to admit, they were indeed capable of such actions.

Lila turned to Daphne and pulled her aside for a moment.

"I just cannot believe this has all taken place! We should go and see whether they are in their rooms after we finish cleaning here." She said quietly.

Her friend nodded nervously, also looking concerned. So they continued to work silently, waiting until all the other maids moved on to the next area before they headed off towards the guest rooms secretly.

The guest hall was a very large and extravagant area located in the east wing of the castle on the second floor, and it was absolutely decked in luxury. There was expensive drapes and furniture all along the walls, with large windows facing the scenery outside. She had heard from those who cleaned the rooms that the insides were grand as well.

After a moment Lila spotted a guard nearby. She took a deep breath and casually approached.

"Excuse me Sir, where might I find the rooms of the King's tutors? We are here to clean their chambers." She said casually.

The man frowned, eyeing them suspiciously.

"Go away ladies! This area is currently under investigation so no one is allowed to enter." He replied harshly.

"Oh my, what happened?" Lila asked with fake surprise.

"The men you are seeking were arrested for treason last night. Their rooms and affects are being inspected as we speak." He explained.

Lila felt her heart sink like a rock in the lake. Then the rumors were true this time! But why? Why would Bartholomew be so kind and generous to her if he was just here to murder the King? It didn't make any sense at all!

"This is all so terrible! What an awful thing to hear..." Lila said, not even having to fake the emotion in her voice.

"Well they have been caught, so justice will be done. Now be gone ladies; there is nothing for you here." The guard said a little gentler, apparently softened by her sincere distress.

Daphne and her left right away and found a secluded spot to talk. Lila had to hold back her tears of disappointment as they whispered.

"Then it is true! They really were arrested for treason!" Daphne said with shock.

Lila shook her head, still unconvinced. These facts just didn't add up! Her gut was telling her something just wasn't right here. Perhaps they had indeed been faking their kindness all along, easily fooling a simple county girl like her. But what would they have gained from tricking her in that way? It was not as if she had any influence or title, or anything at all to which they could exploit. She could only conclude that Bartholomew's gestures and words had indeed been sincere, so this must all be some kind of misunderstanding!

Still, Lila really could not be sure of her thoughts completely. She at least wanted to talk to the two of them and hear what they had to say, face to face. Only then would she be able to make her mind up on the matter! But they were probably in the dungeon as prisoners by now, and she was not sure gaining access to see them would even be possible.

"Do you think we could speak with them somehow?" Lila asked aloud.

Daphne looked at her with astonishment, eyes wide with fear.

"But they are in the dungeon Lila!" She said with worry.

"I know but I have to do this Daphne! I just cannot believe that the two of them have done these things. What if this has all been some kind of mistake?" She said.

Daphne nodded gravely. "I agree; it is all so upsetting. But how will we even be able to see them? I do not think anyone can see a prisoner unless a guard accompanies them, and I doubt any of the King's men will be keen on taking us to see them without good cause."

Lila sighed. That was true. But still, there had to be a way to see them. There just had to be!

"Let us go and see what we can do." She said.

Daphne nodded in agreement. Then the two of them made their way back downstairs and towards the dungeon.

Westan sat in the corner of his room, scowling terribly. So it was official now! Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson really were nothing more than treacherous liars! Late last night Zacchaeus's men had uncovered that they were both actually spies sent from the King of Chivele, and that they were actually plotting to kill him!

At first Westan had hoped it to all be a misunderstanding. But after inspecting their rooms a poisonous dagger and assassination note had been found. It seemed Zacchaeus had been right about his instincts towards them after all, as he often was.

His council man had then Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson brought before Westan as the charges were made before witnesses. Both men tried to deny the whole thing of course, but he had no real reason to believe anything they said with all the evidence being right there in front of him. So

rightfully he had them both bound and taken to the dungeon where all the rest of the wretched criminals belonged.

Zacchaeus came back to his chambers afterwards in an effort to console him, but it was no use. Westan felt like nothing more than a complete and utter fool. He had known better than to let his guard down, yet he had ignored such thoughts when it came to them and in doing so he had risked his very life!

"Zacchaeus, I am sick and tired of being betrayed by these worthless peasants! How many more traitors must I endure?" Westan said with frustration, pacing back and forth.

The man looked at him seriously. "Your Highness, this is a necessary hardship as King."

"But I never had a choice in being King! I absolutely despise my life. Why can I not live without these cares?" Westan snapped.

"Sire, how will you fulfill your duties living that way?" Zacchaeus asked.

Westan scoffed. "*Why* do I need to handle such things? You do them well enough now without me!"

The man nodded. "That is true, but *I* am not the King. I still need your permission for many matters. Unless you were to full relinquish such duties to me I am afraid that you must remain ever part of these dealings, and hardships."

"Can I not simply put you in charge of everything then? Who would even care if I did anyways?" Westan shouted angrily.

Then he turned away from Zacchaeus and kept pacing around the room in an effort to try and think clearly. Westan just could not handle anymore deceit or betrayal! It was far too painful and frustrating! Especially from good seeming men such as Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson.

"My Lord, I would be quite happy to relieve you of this troublesome burden. But you would have to make my authority from you official. We could put it into writing perhaps." The man said.

Westan felt his breath catch. He had said that out of mere anger a moment ago, but was Zacchaeus *seriously* offering him the option to give up all these duties for good? To go through his day however he pleased, with no more studies or responsibilities to worry about? He had not known that was possible!

"W-Would that really be alright?" Westan asked.

Zacchaeus came over and put a hand on his shoulder, a wide grin on his face.

"Your majesty you know I am always happy to serve you. So if you cannot handle these duties then I *should* be the one to care for them." He said.

Westan looked away with shame. Indeed, he was incapable of doing anything right it seemed.

"You are probably right. But, will it really be allowed?" Westan asked.

The man nodded. "Yes of course, with the proper documents that is. Once it is made official then there will be nothing that can dispute it."

Westan nodded slowly, feeling a strange mixture of relief and sadness. His complaints and struggles seemed so strangely pointless now. He supposed that he just had to accept that no one would ever truly care about him, aside from Zacchaeus that is. But perhaps that was the way it was meant to be. After all, such burdens always came with being the King.

"Are you crazy? I could lose my job or even my head for this!" The guard snapped.

Lila scowled and crossed her arms angrily.

Currently, Daphne and she were at the dungeon's entrance trying to bribe the watch guard to walk them down to where Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson were being kept. But it was proving more difficult than she had thought.

"Is there *nothing* we can do to persuade you? Please, it is very important that I see these men!" Lila said, becoming quite flustered.

The man glared at her with aggravation. "What business could you have with the traitor's anyways?"

"I told you; I heard about their actions and I wish to confront them personally!" She snapped.

The guard crossed his arms angrily, not looking too convinced of her excuse. Lila knew using such reasoning was dangerous, but it was the best she could come up with. After all, if she told this man the truth he might arrest her on grounds of conspiring with the traitors.

But suddenly the guard looked to Daphne who was standing beside her, and she saw something in his expression change.

"Well, perhaps there is *something* that could persuade me." He said with a grin.

Lila eyes narrowed.

"Like what?" She asked stupidly, already aware of his intentions.

The man shrugged. "How's about your lady friend there share a meal with me in exchange?"

Lila frowned. How dare he try to bribe her with such an idea! She would never agree to let her friend go along with such a questionable arrangement!

The two of them would just have to find another way around this man.

"*If* you would take her down to the dungeon, then I would indeed be more than happy to join such a noble guard for an evening meal." Daphne said in an ever so sweet way.

The man smiled with excitement and Lila dropped her jaw in shock.

"Very well then miss, I suppose I could make an exception for you. Just this once." He said, quickly grabbing some keys from his pocket.

Lila turned and stared at her friend with horror. She couldn't even believe Daphne of all people would agree to such a thing! Was this really the same shy and timid girl she knew?

Daphne smiled at her nervously and ushered her on. They both knew this really was the only way for them to gain entrance.

Lila nodded at her encouragement and turned towards the guard again.

"Very well, I am ready when you are." She said.

"Alright, just be quiet and follow me closely. If we are quick, we will not be noticed." He said.

Daphne put on a fake smile. "Thank you kind sir. We are very grateful for your help."

He smiled back bashfully. Then he grabbed a torch as he opened the metal door and started leading the way down the stairs with enthusiasm. Lila followed closely, descending into the dark tunnel while Daphne stayed put upstairs. Once the two of them reached the dungeon below she was indeed grateful that her friend had not come, for it was positively the most terrible place she had ever seen in her entire life. The whole place was dimly lit, rat infested, and reeked of the most horrible stench there ever was. It was so grim, with hungry prisoners filling each and every thick bared cell. Lila never could have imagined such a loathsome place on her own

even if she tried and found herself shivering from the thought of being imprisoned here. Truly she understood Daphne's fears now.

Eventually the guard came to a certain cell and stopped. Then he gestured towards it.

"They are in there. You have two minutes." He said very seriously.

Lila nodded and went over to the cell doors as he stayed behind to keep watch. She looked through the thick bars hesitantly, nervous about what she might see. Crouched in the room's corner were two men with heads hung in despair.

"Bartholomew, Mr. Jameson?" She called to them anxiously.

Both heads snapped up and looked her way with astonishment. Two familiar men, both with clothes torn and tattered and who looked beaten, stared back at her with astonishment.

"M-miss Lila?" Bartholomew asked with a voice full of disbelief.

Lila's heart sank, both at the realization of their arrest and at the sight of their appearances.

"So it *is* you." She whispered.

"Wh-What are you doing down here?" Mr. Jameson asked.

With a pained groan Bartholomew got up and came over to her, his hands still tied.

"I came to see if everything I heard was true, if you really tried to kill the King!" She said hopelessly.

"Certainly not!" Mr. Jameson replied with indignation.

"Lila, we would never do such a thing! Surely you must know my father and I are innocent!" Bartholomew said anxiously.

"But here you are! And they say you were caught with evidence too!" Lila replied.

"Please Lila, you must believe us! We know nothing about such items! They have been planted in our rooms as false evidence. We are being framed!" He said desperately.

Lila said nothing in return. She really did want to believe them, but it wasn't easy. How did she know for sure whether or not they were telling the truth?

"Why would anyone try to frame you for this?" Lila asked, her arms crossed.

Bartholomew met her eyes with all seriousness. "I believe it was because of my research. You see, a few weeks ago I came across some suspicious looking documents signed by the King. However, I quickly realized that it did not match his handwriting, so I decided to look further into it secretly. When you saw me at the library a while back I was looking at some older writings of his and found that the documents still did not match the signatures. I concluded that someone must be illegally signing documents in the King's name, and possibly without his knowledge. I suspected Zacchaeus, his most trusted advisor, as some of his work appears quite similar. I was trying to get a newer sample of his writing but I suppose he was made aware of my investigation. He must have set this whole ploy up so I would not be able to expose him!"

Lila was in pure shock for a moment. What Bartholomew was saying made perfect sense! As the King's tutor, surely he was quite familiar with his writing style and signature. And she remembered how suspicious the council man seemed to her at first glance. But still, could this whole setup possibly be true?

"This is all very hard to believe you know..." Lila said honestly.

Bartholomew's blue eyes gazed anxiously at her. "Please Lila, we have done nothing of the sort of which we are accused! I would never think of

endangering the King! The only reason I decided to probe this situation any further was out of concern for him! Ever since Zacchaeus talked to him that day when we were gathered in the hall near the garden, the King has been acting very strangely. He seems quite troubled and never returned to his usual self. This was about the time when I noticed the suspicious documents, and from then I knew something must be wrong."

Bartholomew's eyes were so sincere and that Lila just had a feeling he really was being truthful. The whole story was far too intricate and detailed to be simply made up anyways! But even if she did believe him, then what? What could *she* do about it all? They were both here as criminals, and would be charged for treason with a mountain of evidence against them. They stood no chance in front of the King if their enemy was his most trusted advisor! His manipulation surely ran deep.

"Save your breath my son. We stand condemned before her and everyone else." Mr. Jameson said hopelessly.

Bartholomew gazed at her with desperation.

"Lila please, I beg you to believe me! I promise that I have held back nothing from you!" He said.

Lila wished more than anything else in the world to put him at ease and to say that she believed him. But the guard was still standing there listening to all of this. If Lila planned on trying to clear their names, then she had to be discrete about it.

Lila crossed her arm and refused to look either of them in the eyes as she spoke.

"How can you expect me to believe all this? You are both just liars and criminals!" She yelled.

Bartholomew's face fell and he looked completely crushed. Mr. Jameson sighed from his corner and shook his head in despair.

Lila quickly turned and began walking away. She could not bear to look at them in such a state any longer! Besides, there was not much time to formulate a rescue plan.

"Lila wait! Please wait!" Bartholomew called after her in a voice full of agony.

Lila felt an ache in her heart at the sound of such a desperate plea. But she dared not turn around, else she might lose her will to keep up the act.

"Let those filthy rats rot! Good for nothing rubbish is what they are." The guard snorted as he led the way back.

Lila had to hold her tongue at hearing such harsh words. She instead tried to focus on coming up with a rescue plan. When they returned upstairs she ran into Daphne's arms and took a few much needed breaths of fresh air as her friend stroked her head.

"I told you those men are guilty as charged. No sense in crying over their fate girly." He said with a shrug.

Then he turned to Daphne with a large smile. "Now, about supper tonight Miss?"

"I am too busy tonight. Tomorrow will be better for me." She said nervously.

The man frowned and crossed his arms.

"Very well, but I had better see you then. I shall not have any pity for ladies who have gone and tried to use me for suspicious activity." He said with narrowed eyes.

Lila felt her heart skip a beat. Was he *threatening* them?

"Oh sir, you are persistent! How charming." Daphne said with a smile so real even Lila was fooled into thinking she was serious.

The man blushed and nodded, looking more at ease. Then the two of them left, running straight to their rooms where no one was likely to be yet.

Once they were alone Lila sank to the floor and let out a loud sigh.

The condition of the prison, the appearance of Mr. Jameson and Bartholomew, as well as the look on his face when she pretended not to believe him had all been far too much for her to bear! Both men looked so heartbroken, so hopeless. It was something she had never seen before!

"Oh Lila, are you alright? What did they say?" Daphne asked.

"They say they have been framed, and I believe them. They are indeed innocent!" She replied.

Her friend looked surprised and frightened by such news. "Oh my, what are they to do then?"

Lila knew she had to do something to help them, to prove their innocence and expose Zacchaeus. She just didn't know what though. Was it even possible to clear their names at this point? Would the King even listen to someone like her on a matter such as this? She supposed she would just have to somehow think of a way; the lives of two good men depended on it!

"Zacchaeus, I do not think this is completely necessary." Westan protested with shock.

His council man had returned with the documents for him to sign, which would instill authority and power over to him. But in signing it Westan would actually be handing over *all* of his power, and he was not so sure he liked the sound of that.

Zacchaeus looked at him with surprise. "My Lord I apologize, but I was not expecting you to actually read it."

Indeed, usually Westan did not bother trying to read anything Zacchaeus asked him to sign. But ever since his lessons with Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson he was now able to read simple documents like this easily.

Zacchaeus cleared his throat. "I understand your hesitance sire; it's written structure might seem unnerving. However, it must be worded this way if you want people to fully accept my authority."

Westan gulped. This whole arrangement was starting to make him feel very uncomfortable. If he signed this then he would be free from his duties, but at the sake of all his other freedoms!

Zacchaeus shook his head. "My Lord, if you do not sign this document then we cannot make it official. You will remain in this same position you have despised all these years."

"I know!" Westan snapped, feeling quite pressured.

The man sighed with frustration and sat down next to him at his desk.

"My Lord, I only rush you because a very important order must be made tonight and I fear you will not want to be the one responsible for it." He said seriously.

"Like what?" Westan asked.

The man shook his head. "Your false tutors must be executed immediately, or I fear someone may try and free them. If they escape and get into contact with their allies, then we will have an even bigger problem on our hands."

Westan jumped up from his seat and stared at his council man with shock. Prison was one thing, but he didn't want to have Mr. Jameson and Bartholomew put to death! Even if they did betray his trust he still didn't feel that such a harsh punishment was needed.

Zacchaeus stood up and put a hand on his shoulder.

"I understand your feelings my King, you are very much like your father before you. He too was a kind and compassionate man who did not like to execute prisoners. But remember, such hesitation is what cost your parents their lives." He coldly.

Westan sighed quietly. He certainly did not want to make the same mistake his parents had so many years ago. But still, he also did he feel ready to agree to this contract!

"Zacchaeus I need time to think about this. But I leave the matter of the prisoners it to you." Westan said reluctantly.

His council man looked very surprised and disappointed by his words. But he nodded and gave a bow.

"Very well sire. I shall arrange the event for tomorrow morning at sunrise. Make sure you are ready by then." Zacchaeus said.

Westan looked up at him with horror.

"What do you mean? I do not actually have to attend this, do I?" He asked.

The man sighed. "I know you do not like the idea, but as the one in charge my King, you must be present for the execution."

"But I... really do not want to witness such a thing..." Westan said with a gulp.

He had never seen anyone die before! Besides, the thought of watching it happen to men he had known made him want to shiver.

"Unless you want to sign the contract and let me go in your place then you *must* attend." Zacchaeus said strongly.

Westan gulped again. He supposed he had no choice then, he would have to pick one of these two options tonight!

"Zacchaeus, please give me some time to think about this. I just am not sure what to do..." He said.

The man sighed with aggravation and rubbed his forehead.

"Very well my Lord, I shall return in one hour's time to hear your answer. But I strongly suggest you allow me the honor of ruling in your place. If you chose otherwise, be prepared to bear all your royal duties more fully from now on." He said harshly.

Westan flinched at his words and watched as Zacchaeus got up and walked towards the door, leaving his room without another word.

Westan sighed as he went and sat back down in his chair. He knew his council man could probably rule the Kingdom far better than he ever could, but this was still his family's castle and land and he did not want to give it up so easily! But still, he did not want to watch the execution of Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson either. How he wished now that he had just made them leave the day they arrived! Then all of this could have been avoided.

Daphne and Lila were discussing their plan to rescue Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson when the rest of the maids entered into the room that night. They tried to leave in order to talk elsewhere, but some frightful news caught their attentions first.

"What!?" Lila gasped with horror.

"You heard me Lila! There's going to be an execution tomorrow at dawn, for the tutor and his young son!" A young girl exclaimed.

"Oh my! How terrible." A woman lamented.

"I hear it's going to be by public beheading too." Another girl added.

Lila pictured the scene instantly. Bartholomew and his father being led up to the stage before a crowd heads covered, them being put in the stocks, and then the blade falling. Her stomach churned.

This man Zacchaeus was absolutely wicked! It was clear to her that he only wanted Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson taken care of before they spread any truth about him. He was a merciless and cowardly man! Lila knew she had to find a way to expose him to the King before these men suffered an unjust fate.

"Maybe I should quit and go home like my granny suggested..." A young girl said seriously.

Just then, Lila was made to think about her own father. If she died because of some foolish actions, like trying to expose the King's counsel man then he would be left alone without her support! Her father always said he would not know what to do if anything befell her. What if the heartache of her death killed him too?

Lila shook her head. No! How could she think like that? How could she just stand by and watch as Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson, two innocent men, be executed for a crime they did not commit? The King also had the right to know the truth about his most trusted advisor, even if he didn't want to believe it. This man's manipulation could infect the entire Kingdom if left unchecked. Besides, Lila did not think her father would back down in the same situation. He had always been a just man who believed in defending the truth. If he were here, he would do that same things she was about to do. And if something did happen to her, she could take comfort knowing Maryann would care for her father in the end.

Lila nodded to herself, determined to go through with her rescue attempt now no matter what. But what could a simple maid like her do anyways?

"Whatever is the matter Lila?" Tam suddenly asked with false sounding concern.

Lila pulled away from her thoughts and looked up to see the maid glaring at her with a cruel grin.

"Are you upset over your *precious* lover's impending doom?" She giggled.

Lila gasped in shock at Tam's words.

"How dare you make jokes at a time like this! Have you no shame at all? Those men are both going to die you know!" She snapped.

Tam scoffed. "So? They deserve it for trying to assassinate our beloved King!"

Lila clenched her fists in rage. What was the matter with this girl? Was she really so cruel and heartless? Did she have no compassion in her?

Suddenly Tam came towards her with a grin.

"I bet you and Daphne are upset because the two of you are in on the treason too! In fact, it would not surprise me at all." She said.

That was it, Lila simply could not listen to her words anymore!

"Shut up!" Lila snapped as she shoved Tam away.

"You are the most wretched girl I have ever met!" She screamed.

Tam tried to shove her back angrily, but Lila moved out of the way and then pushed her as hard as she possibly could. Tam stumbled back across the room and tripped over the rug on the floor. Then Lila ran over pinned her down. All the girls gasped in shock and moved out of the way of their fight.

"What are you doing Lila? Stop it!" Daphne said anxiously.

"Get off me Lila! Get off me right now!" Tam shouted.

"No, you listen Tam! I have wrestled countless bulls and horses back home, so do not I think I cannot take you on at any time! If you ever say

another word to me or Daphne, I swear you will regret it!" Lila threatened.

Tam suddenly stopped moving and gazed at her with eyes full of fear.

"Do you understand me!?" She snapped.

The girl made no reply but she nodded slowly with serious understanding.

"Good." Lila growled.

Then she got off Tam and looked towards Daphne.

"Come on, we need to get out of here." She said.

Her friend nodded and followed her out of the room quickly. Lila immediately headed to somewhere more private to talk. The two of them hurried away to a hidden corner of an empty hallway a little way away.

"Lila just what were you thinking back there? You know you will get into trouble for fighting!" Daphne scolded.

Lila scoffed. "I do not even care anymore! Besides, I have more important things to worry about right now. Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson are in very grave danger!"

Daphne nodded with worry. "Wh-What do we do then?"

"Well, I think we will probably have to speak with the King somehow and convince him of their innocence. Probably tonight, if there is to be any chance in saving them." Lila said, still scowling.

Daphne went pale and looked at the ground.

"Lila, this is all so frightening. I do not know if I can do this." She whispered, shaking slightly.

Lila immediately felt bad. That's right, Daphne was risking her neck here too. And she had ten siblings back home to care for! Lila could not expect such a sacrifice from her dear friend, not would she want her to meet the same fate.

She smiled. "Do not worry Daphne, I do not ask you to follow me in this. Besides, if something befalls me I want you to inform my father what has truly happened. I will go alone tonight and see what can be done for Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson, if anything at all."

Daphne started crying and gave her a tight hug.

"Please, just be careful. If it looks too dangerous just come back!" She begged.

"I certainly will try." Lila said gently, feeling tears in her own eyes now.

Then she headed to where the King's chambers were located by herself. She knew it were located in the west wing on the second floor, all the way on its far end. But even so, getting there would prove difficult. It was already past midnight now so maids walking around might be viewed as suspicious. She would have to sneak around the well-guarded castle without being seen by anyone the whole way.

Lila tip toed down the hallway and up the stairs as quietly as she could, dodging guards as they walked by patrolling. Twice she nearly exposed herself by accident. Her heart was beating faster than it ever had before, and with each step she second guessed herself.

Was she being stupid right now? Should she just forget this plan and let the two men be killed for a crime they did not commit to save herself? Lila knew she could let that happen, but she also knew it just wouldn't be right! She simply had to do this, if not who knew what else that council man would continue to do freely! The King may be an immature and annoying sort of person, but he also seemed to be a good man deep down! She had hope he would at least hear her out for curiosities sake.

Eventually Lila made it to where the King's chambers were located. There she saw four guards standing by, each armed with a weapon.

Lila sighed. Now what was she supposed to do?

"Arrrg!" Westan growled with frustration as he threw his pillow aside.

It was nearly midnight now, but he just could not seem to sleep knowing that he would be watching Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson's beheading the next morning! He really hated when people were killed, even if they did deserve it.

Then again, Westan knew he could just sign Zacchaeus's stupid document and be free of such a haunting experience. But he really didn't want to do that and relinquish all his power either! Was there no other option to choose from?

Westan sighed. How was he so powerless all the time despite being King? It just wasn't fair!

Just then a loud knock came at his door. Westan sat up with a scowl. Was it Zacchaeus already? Did he have to make a choice so soon?

"What?" Westan snapped loudly, not feeling ready to answer at all.

"My Lord, are you expecting a servant?" One of the guards outside asked.

Expecting a servant *other* than Zacchaeus? Like whom?

Westan got up and went over to the door curiously.

"Why? Who is there?" He demanded as he opened the door.

To Westan's great surprise, the red haired servant girl was standing there. She was shaking slightly, with each of her arms being held by a guard.

"Here I am, just as you ordered your Majesty." She said nervously.

Westan looked at her with sheer confusion. Just what was she saying? He certainly had not summoned her!

But then he smiled with comprehension, realizing that the servant girl was clearly up to something. He curiously wondered just what she was doing, and how well she would hold up under some pressure.

"Please remind me, what did I call you for again?" He asked with a smirk.

"I am just bringing some of those feisty words you are so fond of." She answered calmly.

Westan laughed for a moment. He wondered if she was incredibly reckless or just plain foolish! But he supposed he could use some entertainment at a time like this.

"My Lord, I know it is late and I have disturbed you, so punish me for that in any way you see fit. But please, it would bring me the greatest honor if you would only listen to my message for a moment first!" She said, trying to bow.

"Tell me why I should not have you taken to the dungeon this very instant for your utter lack of respect first?" He asked with a raised eye brow.

"Because you are interested in what I might have to say." She replied confidently.

Westan's eyes narrowed at her angrily. He was quite offended by her bold statement, and the fact that she was right. He was indeed far too curious to send her away just yet, and she well knew it.

"You are lucky your very arrogance amuses me. You have one minute to keep my attention servant girl." He said seriously.

Westan watched with intrigue as her thoughtful eyes immediately became fierce and full of determination, as if she had just gained immense strength. Then she took a deep breath and faced him fearlessly.

"For many years I have heard rumors about you my King, many of them containing frightful stories that portray you as heartless and cruel. But now I have actually met you, and I know that none of the things said about you can possibly be true. They were nothing more than made up lies!" She said.

Westan scoffed, both surprised and offended by her words. Just where did she get the gal to think she knew a single about him?

"What could *you* possibly know about *me*, you lowly peasant? I only took notice of you a few times out of sheer curiosity!" He snapped.

The maid gazed back at him in a surprisingly gentle way.

"That may be true. But I have learned that you are not vicious or heartless like everyone says! You are just the opposite in fact!"

"So what? I do not care what anyone thinks about me! Hurry up and get to the point!" Westan roared impatiently.

The girl took another deep breath before she spoke, her face unwavering.

"My Lord I am here to say that Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson are most certainly not guilty of the crime they have been accused of! And I know *you* know that just as well as I do!" She said seriously.

All four of his guards quickly swarmed around her with ropes and tried to gag her. But Westan was in a state of complete shock.

Was this girl serious right now? *This* is what she came here to say?

"Halt!" He shouted to his men just before they finished gagging her.

The guards held the servant girl tightly as he walked over and stared at her face to face.

"How dare you come to me and try to defend those traitors! They came to my castle in order to *kill* me! But what makes you think you know anything about it anyways? You are just a silly maid who's forgotten her place!" He sneered.

The girl stared back at him fearlessly.

"But what if, as impossible as it may seem, that they are indeed innocent and you are about to kill them without cause? What if these terrible accusations are wrong, just like so many were about *you*? We both know those two men are truly good and kind, else you would not have put up with them the way you did!" She said.

Westan's eyes widened in surprise, and he looked at the girl with astonishment, not even knowing what to say in return.

But, how? How could she always be so logical and confident? Here she was, risking her life in order to try and defend Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson's treasonous act! And besides that, what if she was actually right? What if they were indeed innocent somehow?

Westan supposed it was possible, and that perhaps the evidence found had been wrong. Maybe Zacchaeus's men had simply made a mistake. Maybe Westan could have the case investigated again, just to be sure. After all, it wouldn't hurt to make sure of this matter. And if it turned out that they had indeed been wrongly accused for this crime, then it would mean they were both truthful and sincere men after all. He would be relieved at such an outcome to say the least.

"Perhaps you are right. I suppose it would not hurt to re-investigate before an execution takes place. And seeing as you are quite confident that they are innocent, I assume you must have a reason to support it." Westan said seriously.

At his words the servant girl's eyes immediately betrayed her great relief, and he could not help but chuckle. So she *had* been afraid after all! He was very much impressed by how well she had been able to hide it. Although he was currently far more curious to hear her reason for coming here in the middle of the night and defending Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson so confidently. Did she have evidence of her own perhaps?

"No my Lord! Do not listen to any more of this wench's words! She must be a spy working alongside the two prisoners!" One of the guards suddenly said.

"Be silent! I am the King and I will do as I please! Now release her at once so I may hear her testimony!" He snapped.

His guards looked quite astonished by his words, and for a moment they looked frozen in confusion.

"What are you waiting for? I said release her!" Westan commanded, aggravated by their delay.

Suddenly the servant girl's eyes widened with a fear he did not understand.

"Watch out!" She yelled.

Westan looked at her with confusion as one of the men quickly gagged her. Then he watched with horror as the other two men suddenly came and grabbed *him*.

"What do you think you are doing!? Unhand me!" Westan demanded furiously.

Roughly the men then forced him into his own room and pushed him onto the floor, quickly gagging him and tying up his hands and feet. Westan looked around the room with confusion and anger, unable to believe what was happening.

"What is the meaning of this!?" He screamed through the gag.

The guards ignored him as they all came into the room, quickly shoving Lila onto the ground next to him.

"Hurry up, shut the door!" One of them snapped.

One of the men obeyed and quietly closed the door. Then they all came over and stared down at Lila and him as they both lay there helplessly. But Westan could not even comprehend what had just happened. Had he really

just been attacked and captured by his own guards? Just what was the meaning of all this?

"RELEASE US!" Westan shouted with outrage.

One of the guards, the obvious leader of this rebellion, just ignored his shouting and started giving out his own commands.

"Go and fetch the boss, tell him what happened! You two, go stand outside like nothing is wrong." He ordered.

The men all nodded in obedience, except for one. A young man who looked quite confused by what was going on himself.

"Wh-What are you doing? Wh-Why are we attacking his Highness?" He asked nervously.

One of the men snorted. "You knew our orders were to keep an eye on him in case he acted suspiciously!"

"Yes, but this is treachery! We cannot attack his royal Majesty!" The young man said, looking around anxiously.

"If you are not with us, then you are against us boy." The man in charge said seriously.

The young man made no move. He just stared at them all, looking unsure of what to do.

"Do not listen to them! Free us!" Westan shouted to him desperately.

The boy probably could not understand his exact words through the gag, but still he nodded and pulled out his sword, ready to fight. One of the other traitors attacked him and within a mere moment he was knocked unconscious and bound as well. After a moment the leader came over and kicked his limp body.

"Stupid rat! I knew he was too cowardly to join us." He growled angrily.

Then the man turned to the other two with angry eyes.

"Go and do what I said, *now!*" He snapped.

Westan continued shouting out commands and threats as the two men left the room, but it was no use. The leader guard scoffed at him with a cruel smile.

"I am sorry my King, but I cannot understand what you are saying!" He taunted with a laugh.

Westan blushed with fury. How dare this man mock him! They would all regret this disrespect! He would make sure of it!

Westan looked over at the servant girl Lila. She was busy struggling to free her hands so he tried to do the same. But the ropes were strong, and neither of them were able to do anything except rub their wrists raw.

"I suggest you save your energy and relax. The two of you are going nowhere." The guard chuckled as he sat in his desk chair comfortably.

Westan scowled. How dare this man be so arrogant! What a fool, this kidnap attempt like this would end as all the rest did; with their own capture and execution! Zacchaeus would never show them any mercy for this!

The minutes crawled by slowly as Westan lay there under the guard's careful watch, eagerly contemplated the punishment for these men's treachery. He was also looking forward to Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson's new investigation. He would be sure to look into the case personally and hear out their testimonies this time. Perhaps Lila was right and they were in fact being framed. If that was the case, then whoever it was would indeed be sorry when they were found out and caught. Westan did not plan on showing mercy to someone so cowardly as to falsify another's reputation before him. Those criminals would be forced to face the very same fate Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson had been sentenced to!

After a short while, a knock at the door interrupted his thoughts. Westan immediately tried shouting for help, but the guard watching over them got

up and opened the door to his chambers without any hesitation. One of the traitors entered the room, and then to his great surprise, so did Zacchaeus.

"Zacchaeus!" Westan shouted with surprise.

For a moment it was strangely quiet, and no one seemed to make a single move at all. Then it hit Westan; perhaps Zacchaeus had been captured by these men too!

Westan's hopes of being rescued fell. Great! Now who was going to save them?

Zacchaeus suddenly turned to the guards in the room.

"You men, give us some privacy." He commanded.

"Yes sir." They all replied.

Then Westan watched with shock as all three traitors actually obeyed Zacchaeus and left the room quietly. He immediately looked at his council man, the person he trusted most in his life, with surprise.

His council man saw his expression and chuckled darkly.

"Oh dear, it seems I have been found out." He said with excitement.

Chapter 09- The Beast Reveals Himself

Lila watched with a mixture of satisfaction and disappointment as the King finally realized that his council man was both a traitor and manipulator.

"What is going on!?" The King shouted through the cloth gag.

The council man looked down at him coldly and chuckled. Then he suddenly turned to face her with a sneer.

"Tsk, tsk." He said while shaking his head. "Look what you have done! I was about to convince him to sign a document that would enable me to take over the Kingdom! "

Lila frowned. So her suspicions had been right! This wicked man had been plotting something big after all. This must be why he had Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson arrested so suddenly; they were getting too close to the truth!

The council man then turned his attention back to the confused looking King with another chuckle.

"I am honored that you look so surprised my Lord. It means my deception really was very good after all." He said with amusement.

"What are you doing?" The King demanded with hurt and anger.

The man kept on a cold smile as he came over and picked up the King's crown, which had tumbled off of him when the guards had attacked, and placed it on his own head. He took a moment to examine himself in the mirror.

"I have coveted this for many years you know. It truly has not been easy to watch a little brat wear it like some kind of toy!" The man growled angrily.

The King's face went pale and he looked down at the ground. He looked utterly crushed by his advisor's betrayal.

"Why are you doing all of this?" He shouted.

Zacchaeus sighed and came over to remove the King's gag.

"I am afraid I did not quite understand that." He said with aggravation.

"Why are you doing all of this? If that stupid crown is all you want then just take it!" The King growled through gritted teeth.

The man smiled. "But I cannot reign supreme while *you*, the only heir to the throne, yet live."

Lila saw the color drain from the King's face again at the mention of his death. She scowled. She really wanted to give this wicked and cruel man a piece of her mind! But she wisely stayed quiet and concentrated solely on freeing her hands. Although no one would have guessed it, Lila was actually quite good with ropes. Since her father had been a sailor he had taught her all kinds of ways to tie and untie knots, a skill she was now thankful for. And as suspected, the two men continued to talk without paying any attention to her whatsoever.

"I never thought *you* of all people would betray me like this! Why did you even bother letting me live this long if you just intended to take my throne?" The King asked with confusion.

Zacchaeus sighed. "But how obvious it would have been if all the royals had perished at once, leaving the council man to immediately take over! It would be much less suspicious for me to kill the King and Queen, blame it on the King's brother and have him executed, then let the young heir survive. A young King that is nowadays feared and well known for being a cruel tyrant. Once it is known that Chivele succeeded in assassinating you, the people will rejoice! Then the brokenhearted counsel man, who was

almost like a father to the young heir, will take over the kingdom as ruler." He finished triumphantly.

The King was also quite horrified and speechless for a long moment. Lila was a bit surprised to hear his intricate story as well.

"*You* are the one responsible for my parents' murder, yet you blamed it on my innocent uncle and killed him too!?" He said with shock.

The man chuckled. "Indeed. Although I did not plan to actually kill you, unless it became absolutely necessary. You see, as long as I had complete power over you and you continued to rely solely on me, it was as if I was ruling anyways. But you are getting older now and becoming increasingly difficult to keep under control. That is why I planned to have you sign my document. Then I would have been able to keep you confined in a secure room and out of my way without having to resort to this. But alas, you were too stubborn for that."

The King's face became furious. "So you were actually planning to imprison after I signed that paper?"

The man smiled. "What can I say? It was far easier and less messy than this plan."

The King shook his head with confusion. "Then why hire Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson to kill me?"

Zacchaeus laughed and looked back towards Lila. She glared back at him angrily, already aware of what he was about to say.

"This young lady was right when she that those two men were completely innocent in all this. They really are nothing more than simple tutors whom I summoned here to conduct your studies." He said with an excited smile.

"But why are you insisting on their execution then?" The King asked with shock.

The man laughed darkly. "That foolish young boy was caught poking his nose where it did not belong. It seems he figured out I had been signing documents in your name, and he probably planned to expose my dealings to you once he had proper evidence. But in doing so he merely sealed his own fate as well as his fathers. Who on earth did he think he was anyways, investigating my personal dealings with you? It was plain foolishness on his part."

Lila scowled. This man's shameless plan just proved what a heartless coward he really was! But the King looked furious and unable to contain his anger any longer.

"HOW DARE YOU!! You will regret this Zacchaeus, for as long as I live I will never let these deeds of yours go unpunished! NEVER!" He screamed as loud as he could.

Zacchaeus was startled by his raised voice and came over to try and gag him again, but the King resisted and ended up biting his hand in the process.

"You little brat!" The man roared with pain.

He kicked the King out of anger right in the gut. Lila watched the boy groaned in pain and curl up into a ball to catch his breath. Then the council man was able to roughly finished gagging him.

"Now no need to worry my Lord, after your tutor's execution this young servant girl, who is one of their associates, will come and avenge their death. She will first kill you and then herself with none other than the poisonous dagger I had planted in the criminal's room. It will be a very fitting end for you indeed." Zacchaeus said with a cruel smile.

The King began shouting curses as the man threw the crown back down and carefully set the poisonous dagger on his desk.

"Be as angry as you want my King, but there is nothing you can do to stop me. I assure you; no one will be coming to rescue you." Zacchaeus said arrogantly.

Then he opened the door and let the same leader guard from earlier enter. As he went to leave he turned back just briefly to the guard.

"Make sure the King watches the execution tomorrow morning before his own takes place." He commanded coldly.

The King let out an angry roar and started yelled more curses at his betrayer until the door was shut and locked. Then the guard came over and sat in the desk chair, watching both of them closely.

Lila watched the guard warily. She was almost free of the ropes on her wrists, but she could not let this man see her progress, so for now she had to stop moving. Perhaps if the man left the room or fell asleep she would have an opportunity to free the King and herself without being captured again.

Suddenly the King shouted something at the guard. The man immediately stood up and came closer to them.

"Something wrong my Lord?" He asked with a chuckle.

The King started shouting angrily again, but the man just laughed. Then he got a cruel look in his eyes.

"You know the criminals are going to be executed by public beheading tomorrow right? It will be quite a last sight for you to see!" He said with amusement.

The King's eyes widened with shock and he started shouted even louder, but the man just laughed even harder.

"You are so helpless without your precious guards to protect you! You treat us like lowly servants, but without us you are nothing but a helpless little boy!" He taunted.

Suddenly, Lila saw a dangerously powerful look in the man's eyes. She watched helplessly as he came over and kicked the King just like Zacchaeus had. He groaned in pain and curled up to catch his breath again. The guard just laughed with a wicked glint in his eyes and kicked him again. The King groaned in severe pain and sounded unable to catch his breath.

"STOP IT!" Lila yelled.

The guard sneered at her and kicked her too.

"Keep your mouth shut wench! This is all your fault anyhow!" He snapped.

Lila gasped for air and quietly watched as the man kicked the completely defenseless King a few more times. Eventually he stopped and sat back down, almost looking irritated.

"I got a little carried away I guess. I have to remember that we are trying to blame his death on a mere servant girl after all..." The man mumbled to himself.

Lila could no longer see the King's face from where he lay, but she could tell he was in a lot of pain. He kept very still and his breathing was full of struggling, he looked completely worn-out and maybe even unconscious.

Lila knew it was going to be a few hours before dawn, so she decided to wait and see if the guard, who had nothing to fear from two helpless prisoners, would fall asleep and give her any opportunity to escape.

The time passed by very slowly, with minutes feeling like hours and hours feeling like an eternity. The guard kept a close eye on the two of them, occasionally getting up to look out the window or check the door. Eventually though he came across some fine wine in the King's cabinet and began drinking it. That was when Lila realized how very thirsty and hungry she was. In fact, she could not recall if she had even eaten that evening!

Suddenly her stomach growled. The guard gave a laugh and taunted her with his glass of wine. Lila just turned away tried to think of anything other than food. Unfortunately, this meant her thoughts drifted to picturing their imminent death, as well as that of Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson. She wondered how they were even doing right now. Their appearances in the dungeon earlier had been so horrible, as they had probably been tortured by Zacchaeus's men for information, or perhaps just for cruelties sake. She felt just awful for the two of them, especially after hearing that wicked man's confessions about everything. Not that the King and she were in any better of a situation right now. If they did not find a way to escape they would all be dead before sunrise!

Lila suddenly looked around the room, hoping to see anything that could possibly help them all survive the night. After a moment her eyes came to rest on the King's empty bottle of fine wine. The guard apparently drank all of it. She also noticed that the man appeared very relaxed and his eyes were drooping. If perhaps he became comfortable enough to fall asleep, then all she had to do was free herself and untie the King and they could both escape! After that they could get help, rescue Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson, as well as stop Zacchaeus from taking over the Kingdom! Although they would first have to get past the guards outside the door somehow, and Lila had no idea how they were going to do that. And what if the guard did *not* fall asleep? Then what would they do? Lila supposed she could simply free herself and try fighting against the guard while he was still in a drunken state. She doubted that would end well though. But a last resort was a last resort. She would have to do something eventually though, because she was not about to die without a fight!

Not more than two hours later Lila was ever grateful as the guard actually did fall asleep, face down at the King's desk. Since he was

intoxicated with fine wine she hoped his sleep would be deep and not easily disturbed. Lila kept an eye on him warily as she slipped her hands free and quickly untied the rest of her. Then she came over to the King to untie him too, and saw that he wasn't unconscious after all. In fact, he was very much awake and looking extremely depressed. He barely even reacted when she put a hand on his shoulder.

Lila untied him slowly so she could watch the guard carefully. She also made sure to be gentle so she did not cause the King anymore pain. Once he was free she helped him sit up and he stopped to take a few deep breaths. Then he shook off her hand and turned away, looking obviously embarrassed. Lila felt sorry for him. She knew he had not known any better but to mistrust her, Bartholomew, and Mr. Jameson. It was a wonder that the King was even as decent as he was with a man like Zacchaeus raising him!

"Is there another way out of here?" She whispered.

He sighed and shook his head hopelessly. "No."

Lila felt her heart sink. Couldn't she just get a break already?

"Are you crazy?" Westan snapped quietly.

Lila frowned. "Do you have any better ideas?"

The two of them were sitting in the corner of his chambers, as far from the sleeping guard as they could be. He had suggested that they attack the man while he was asleep, but Lila pointed out that the man could still easily overpower them if he woke up before, or that the guards outside might hear them struggling, and that was all true. But her idea of climbing out the

bedroom window to another room nearby was just as dangerous in his mind! After all, the closet window was more than ten feet below his room!

"Look, we have to do something while we still have the chance!" Lila added.

Westan sighed. She was right in that they had to do something quickly. He supposed her plan was the most plausible. Even if they were to try overpowering the guard they would still need a way to escape his room afterwards.

Westan sighed again with defeat. "Very well. I suppose we have no other choice but to go with your plan."

Lila nodded and stood up. "Okay then, let us move quickly."

Westan tried to follow her lead, but as he went to stand up his new bruises caused him to tense up and he unintentionally groaned in pain. He had to stop moving and rest against the wall for a moment to catch his breath.

Westan couldn't even believe the state he was in! To think that his own guards would capture and abused him so! He had never been so humiliated in his entire life. Zacchaeus was the true enemy, while Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson were innocent of everything they had been accused of. And now they were all going to die, all because of his blind ignorance!

"Here." Lila said as she helped him up slowly.

Westan looked away with embarrassment. He wondered why this servant girl was even bothering to help him after the way he had mistreated her earlier. She would be much better off leaving him behind, as his injuries were sure to slow her down. And honestly he was thinking that death might just be better anyways. How could he ever go on living as a fugitive in his own Kingdom?

Westan knocked Lila's hand away.

"Just go; leave me here." He said quietly.

"What?" She said in astonishment.

"I said *leave* me. Save yourself, and get help for Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson if you can. I will only be a hindrance in this condition, and this is all my fault anyways. So just concentrate on helping those worth saving."

Westan said bitterly.

"Do not be stupid! I cannot just leave you here like this!" She protested.

"I said LEAVE ME! I will not go along with you, so get yourself out while you can. That is an order." Westan snapped.

Just then he watched as Lila raised her hand up in the air. She swung at him fast and hard, hitting him square on his right cheek.

"Stop acting like such a selfish child!" She whispered angrily.

Westan held his red face and looked at her with shock. He had never been slapped by anyone before in his whole life, yet she had done it without any hesitation at all!

"Look, Bartholomew risked his life to try and help you, and now he is in need of *your* help. Do not let what Zacchaeus said cause you to lose hope or courage, or else he will win! There is still time to save yourself and your kingdom, if you really want to." She said confidently.

Westan looked down at his feet. He did not have high hopes for any such success. But perhaps he could *try* to escape, at least for Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson's sake. He probably really was the only one who could stop their execution anyways. And maybe if he could find some loyal guards then there would be hope to catch Zacchaeus as well. It was a big long shot, but it was also all they had.

"Alright, I shall follow you then." Westan said.

Lila nodded with a smile. Then the two of them stood up, ready to leave. But suddenly, Westan felt a hand grab the back of his shirt, and before

either of them could even react he was pulled into the arms of the no longer sleeping guard. The man quickly put the poisoned dagger Zacchaeus had left on the desk up to Westan's throat. He felt fear engulf him as the knife came dangerously close to his skin, knowing that with one prick he would die a very painful death!

"Now wench, open the door and let the others in!" The guard growled to Lila.

Westan knew their only opportunity for escape was gone, all because of him! *Again!* How incredibly stupid he had been in delaying her with his own selfish fears!

Westan watched helplessly as Lila obeyed the man and headed towards the door. He did not understand why she was even bothering to spare him at this point when doing so meant she would be killed too!

"Run Lila, just go!" He shouted.

The guard tightened his arm around his neck and put the dagger up to his right eye instead. Westan closed his eyes as the dagger came ever close to piercing him.

"Just stop it, I am not trying to run!" Lila said.

The guard snorted. "Then hurry up and open the door!"

Westan opened his left eye and watched helplessly as Lila unlocked and opened the door like the guard had ordered. So it was official, there was no longer any hope for either of them.

If Lila ever believed in miracles, it was now. When she had opened the door, she thought it would lead to both the King's and her own immanent death. But instead she was surprised to see a handful of new guards standing outside, talking with the traitorous ones. However, when they saw the King being held prisoner it was clear that they were not in on the treachery.

The man closest to Lila also looked to be the head guard, for his face instantly became aware of what was going on. His eyes glanced to everyone there in a second, and he already knew who was with him and who was against him. As quick as a flash he pushed past Lila, knocked the dagger out of the startled guard's hand, and threw the King aside to safety. The others with him quickly grabbed hold of the guards outside the door, realizing they were all betrayers, and fought to overpower them. Within moments the traitors were all defeated, after which she was also grabbed, probably mistaken as an enemy too.

"Wait, she is not with those men!" The King shouted just in time.

The head guard eyed her from head to toe as he reluctantly released her, although he did not lower his sword. Lila's heart fluttered nervously as she rubbed her newly sore arm. His grip had been so strong that she was quite positive a dark bruise would soon be forming there!

"My Lord are you alright?" The man asked anxiously.

The King nodded as he sank to the ground, looking incredibly relieved.

"Yes, thank you..." He said, sounding most grateful.

"Forgive us your Majesty for our incompetence and failure to keep you safe from harm!" The head guard said, truly sounding distressed.

"Do not apologize! You saved both our lives just now!" The King replied.

"What is this maid doing here with you? Are you sure she is trustworthy?" The man asked, still suspiciously eyeing Lila.

"Yes. She tried to warn me of all this treachery earlier, but I did not listen. Zacchaeus is actually the one responsible for all you see. He even explained everything to me himself!" The King said bitterly.

The head guard accepted the information, and immediately turned to his men with a counter-plan.

"You three, tie up these treasonous rats. Then go and alert every one of my command for a castle lockdown, no one is allowed to go in or out of the castle until I say so. But do not raise any suspicions. If anyone asks why I am doing this say it is because I fear the prisoners will try and escape before their execution." He said ever so seriously.

The men all nodded and obeyed him right away. But the King also started heading towards the door.

"That execution must be stopped! The men accused are in fact innocent!" He said anxiously.

Lila went to follow, but much to her surprise the head guard grabbed the King by the arm and swung him back into the room. Then he shut the door and locked it.

"What is the meaning of this?" The King snapped, looking quite tired of being thrown around.

The man humbly bowed as he spoke.

"Forgive me my Lord, but it seems there are many betrayers against us. Zacchaeus's guards could even be hiding among my own men! I am afraid that I must keep you here where it is safe." He said.

"But two men are going to be killed for a crime they did not commit!" The King shouted.

The guard shook his head. "Punish me all you want for my disobedience later sire, but I must do whatever is needed in order to protect *you*, even if it is against your will. I am sorry for those men, but your safety is my top priority."

The King clenched his fists in anger and slumped to the ground in frustration.

"I will never be able to forgive myself if they die!" He shouted with anger.

Lila was suddenly very worried for Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson. If they could not do something the execution would still take place in the morning! There had to be a way she could help! There just had to be a way! She had come this far already!

"Wait!" Lila gasped, an ever so brilliant idea suddenly coming to her.

The King and head guard looked at her with great surprise.

"What is it?" The King asked.

"You can let *me* go to the dungeon with a note saying that the King himself has ordered the event to be stopped!" She said.

"Yes, brilliant Lila!" The King said as he stood back up with renewed hope.

The head guard looked impressed and gave her a small smile.

"I do admire your courageous spirit lass. But I fear these men knew you were with the King. If you are seen, it might cause trouble for my men and I cannot allow that." He said, the King's safety still his only priority.

The King growled with frustration again. "So I really will be the cause of Bartholomew's and Mr. Jameson's death then!?"

"Please," Lila said to the guard. "Is there any way at all?"

The man's face was very serious, but he looked thoughtful too. Lila could see that he was a good and reasonable man, one with a duty that that

was more important than his own life and did not want to risk jeopardizing. However, when he saw the King's distress about the matter, she could see a change in his eyes.

"If you want to do this lass, then you must at least make yourself unrecognizable." He said.

The King suddenly came over to her, smiling with hope.

"That will be easy Lila! All you have to do is hide your red hair and freckles!" He said.

Lila frowned with irritation at his unintentional insult, knowing there really was no time to be offended. And he was right anyways she supposed since her looks seemed to stand out. But still, hiding her wild hair was easier said than done. She would never have enough time to tame it!

Just then Lila knew exactly what she had to do. Without hesitation she grabbed the poisonous dagger, it being the only knife within sight, and carefully began cutting off her long red hair. Lila felt a pang in her heart as she chopped off one handful after another, making it short enough to hide under a cloth. She knew her silly red hair wasn't anywhere near as important as saving Bartholomew and his father's life, but it still hurt to throw away what little femininity she had.

Once Lila finished the deed she walked over to the empty fireplace and rubbed some of the ashes on her face and clothes. Then she covered her head with a dirty cloth and looked in the mirror again. Indeed, she was unrecognizable now.

"Well done Lila." The King said, looking at her with admiration.

The head guard nodded in approval and took out the keys to open the door. Lila walked over and prepared to leave.

"Here, this is the proof of my orders." The King said as he handed her a note which he had already written and signed.

"And take this too, you just might need it." The man said as he handed her the poisonous dagger once more.

Lila took both and tucked them away.

"Be careful." The King said, truly looking anxious.

She nodded. "I will."

Then she left, running down the hallway faster than she ever had, already knowing her chances of success were quite slim.

Chapter 10- Out of Time

“Ahh!” Westan winced in pain.

“My apologies sire!” The head guard whose name was Garret said.

The man was trying to bandaged up Westan’s new bruises, and it was turning out to be a very painful process. But he supposed he could not really complain; at least he was still alive.

“Do not apologize. I would be as good as dead without you right now. Thank you again for coming to our rescue.” Westan said quietly.

The head guard looked up at him seriously.

“My Lord, you need not express thanks! Your safety is the most important thing to me. I am just sorry that I did not come to you sooner. The prisoners you are trying to spare kept insisting that you might be in danger, and although I did not exactly believe them I thought it wise to check on you anyways.” He said.

Westan groaned with shame. Even after a death sentence Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson were still trying to protect him! Why? Why did they even care when their own lives were in danger due to him?

Right now the two of them were still locked up in his room quietly, waiting to hear a reply from either Lila or the guards he had sent out. He just hoped someone would be able to stop the execution in time! He just couldn't bear the thought of them dying this way when they really were good and innocent men!

“I always knew Zacchaeus was a snake, but to think he we be bold enough for actions such as this! I should have confronted him years ago before he gained so much power...” Garret growled angrily.

Westan sighed and put his face into his hands. It seemed everyone could see Zacchaeus's true nature, except for *him*. How very blind he truly was.

"Sire, are you quite sure about sending that servant girl? What if she cannot be trusted?" The man suddenly asked with worry.

Westan half smiled to himself. "I do believe she is completely trustworthy. In fact, I think it would be safe to say that I could entrust my very life to her, considering my experiences with her tonight."

"Good. I do hope she makes it in time." He replied.

Westan clenched his fists anxiously. How he wished to have gone with her! He wanted nothing more than to see Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson released safely! He could not express how sick the anticipation was making him.

Westan went over to look out his window. Dawn was almost upon them.

"What!?" Lila shouted with disbelief.

"Yup, the prisoners have already been led up to the stage. Very sorry Miss." The dungeon guard repeated with a shrug.

Lila's heart sank. Would she really be too late after all?

She quickly turned without another word and started running towards the stage outside, not nearly ready to give up just yet. She ran down the stairs and out the castle's doors as fast as her feet would carry her. She was panting terribly, and her legs felt as heavy as metal, but she forced her body to keep on moving.

After a moment Lila saw the stage, and that Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson were already there placed in the stocks. Their heads were covered too, which meant their sentence had already been announced and the executioner would be momentarily heading towards them.

"STOP! BY ORDER OF THE KING, STOOOOP!" Lila screamed over the crowd's excited cheers.

But it was not use; no one paid any attention because no one could hear her! And it was too crowded to reach the stage where the guards stood. So what was she to do? Was she really going to have to stand here and watch them both be killed!?

Just then out of the corner of her eye, Lila saw Zacchaeus sitting in the King's spectator seat. He was boldly taking the King's place today, and no one seemed the wiser of it. The man even sat there with a wide grin on his face.

Lila suddenly got a crazy idea. She quickly pushed her way passed the crowded people, ignoring the increasing volume of their cheers which indicated that the executioner was reaching his ready position. When she made it the spectator's box she was stopped by two large guards.

"Commoners are not allowed beyond this point." One said harshly.

"I have a message from the King!" She said breathlessly, holding up his signed letter.

The guards glanced at one another with sudden confusion. Then Lila heard the crowd's cheers intensify, signaling that the executioner was picking up his axe and preparing to cut the rope that would release the falling blade.

Without thinking Lila dove under the guards and ran to where the council man was sitting. She grabbed him from behind and put the poison dagger to *his* throat.

"TELL THEM TO STOP!!" She screamed.

The man looked at her with anger and elbowed her in the stomach before she could even say another word, knocking her back into his guards' hands.

"An accomplice of the prisoners!" Zacchaeus shouted to them.

The men tightened their grip on her as a sudden silence fell over all the people, indicating the falling of the execution blade.

"NOOO!" Lila shouted with horror.

Westan smiled with triumph as the people below fell silent. He could see the looks of shock on their faces as they looked up and saw him positioned dangerously on the flagpole outside his window.

"MY LORD, COME BACK IN HERE NOW!" Garret shouted as he reached out towards him again.

Westan dodged his hand and crawled a little further out on the pole. He felt bad for worrying the man who had just saved his life, but he was not about to watch helplessly as the execution took place. Since Lila had obviously not been able to make it in time, Westan decided that *he* needed to get the people's attention himself. So when Garret wasn't looking he grabbed a trumpet horn, climbed outside onto the flagpole and started blowing it as loud as he could. When the people finally looked up he took off his crown and started waving it around in the air. It only took a second for them to realize he was the King, and that he was in danger.

"Watch yourself my Lord!" Garret warned.

Westan suddenly slipped, almost causing himself to fall down to the ground below. He gasped with fear and tightened his grip on the pole, pausing to calm himself before he started panicking. Then he took a deep breath and began shouting down to his undivided crowd.

"STOP THE EXECUTION!" He said.

No one made a move, as they did not seem to understand what he was saying. So he repeated it louder this time, but still they did not hear. So he said it once more, as loud as he could in fact. For a moment no one made a move, and Westan wondered if anyone would be able to hear him from this height. But then he saw two guards quickly run onto the stage, they grabbed Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson from the stocks and quickly headed back inside the castle with them. Although the crowd was denied their public execution they all seemed entertained by the King's wild actions, so no one made any fuss as the criminals were taken away to safety.

Westan then felt Garret's grip on the back of his shirt. The man quickly pulled him back into his arms before he could even react, and dragged him off the pole and back into the room. Cheering erupted from the crowd when they saw his safe return.

"That is enough excitement for one day!" Garret snapped as he slammed shut the windows and locked them.

"I apologize, but it really was necessary." Westan said triumphantly.

The man looked at him with irritation, but he still could not stop smiling. Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson were safe! Westan had never been so happy or relieved before in his entire life! He hoped Lila returned soon to hear the good news. Just what had happened to her anyways?

"Let me go!" Lila screamed.

Zacchaeus ignored her as he kept on walking ahead, his two guard pulling her along with them as they tried to make an escape from the castle.

He was leading them through the crowd and trying to reach the outer wall, and apparently he was taking her with them. To passerby's she probably appeared to be a mere criminal under arrest, so no one seemed to take notice. Zacchaeus probably planned to use her as a hostage of some sort, and after that there would be no need to keep her alive. Lila knew that if she did not get away from these men now then she would never be able to! So she kicked, screamed, stomped, and fought against her captors with all her strength. But it seemed her struggling was in vain. She was nowhere near as strong as these grown men, and they refused to let up even a little. They twisted her arms and yanked her around quite easily, as if she were nothing more than a straw doll.

"LET ME GO!" She screamed with real panic rising in her.

Again she was ignored, and Lila felt her heart sink. What was she going to do? There was no way she could break away on her own! So Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson were safe in the end, but now *she* needed to be rescued! And since the head guard had not sent anyone else with her no one would know to come save her!

Lila saw that they were about the reach the castle's outer wall now, but there were dozens of the King's guards standing there to block the entrances. Garret's men had gotten to work quickly it seemed.

Zacchaeus immediately turned around so as to avoid detection by them, probably well aware of the men's intentions. But Lila was not about to let him get away so easily, nor was she going to die without a fight. So she bit the hand covering her mouth, causing the guard to pull it away with a shout. Then she let out the loudest scream she ever had.

"HEEEEEEEELP!" She screamed so loud it hurt her own ears.

Zacchaeus's guard slapped his hand back over her mouth and twisted her arm roughly, but it was too late. Most of the guards at the wall noticed the

scene and were already on their way towards them to investigate.

Zacchaeus and his men tried to run away, but Lila dug her feet into the ground to slow them down as best she could. Before they could get away the King's guards quickly surrounded them all, with swords drawn.

"Stop now, or you will be struck down!" One of them said.

"Enough! Go away and leave us be!" Zacchaeus shouted angrily.

"By order of the King you are all to be arrested and taken into custody!" The man replied.

Zacchaeus looked completely stunned as he glanced around at them all anxiously.

"Arrest *me*? Do you know who I am? I am the King's most trusted advisor!" He declared loud enough for the nearby crowds to overhear.

The King's guard snorted with disdain.

"You mean you are a traitor who tried to kill his Majesty! Come with us peacefully or you will face my sword!" He said seriously.

Zacchaeus glared at him angrily.

"I will have your head for this disrespect boy!" He snapped.

The man shook his head with a smile. "Oh I doubt that very much."

Then the guards advanced upon them. Zacchaeus and his men tried to run away again, but they were all grabbed and wrestled into restraints. Lila was also bound and taken into custody without any question, but she still felt safer than she had been a moment ago. She decided it would be best to keep quiet until they reached the castle so the King could see to her release. But Zacchaeus tried to convince the guards that they were betrayers and fools the whole way back, until one of them gagged him that is.

Lila smiled triumphantly to herself. Zacchaeus would be the one facing punishment soon, while Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson would soon have

their names cleared of everything. She was glad it was all working out justly.

The guards soon reached the castle and brought them all inside. When they entered a large man was there to meet them. He wore a very cold and serious expression.

"So you are the traitors? I bet sometime in the dungeon will set even you right Zacchaeus." He said with a chuckle.

Lila felt a twinge of fear. They were going to be sent to the dungeon *right now*? But the King didn't even know she was captured so he wouldn't know to send for her release!

"Wait! I am not with these men, they kidnapped me!" She protested.

The guard snorted. "We will see about that. After some interrogations I am sure the whole truth will be made clear."

Lila felt panic rising again as the men started heading towards the dungeon with all of them in custody. Was this really happening right now!? Was she to be imprisoned and tortured like Zacchaeus and his men? Even if the King found out about her imprisonment and sent orders to release her, would they come in time to spare her such a fate? How could she prove her innocence to these men?

"Wait! The King sent me out today to try and stop the execution! I have a note from him in my pocket!" Lila said, suddenly remembering the small piece of paper.

The man sighed and rolled his eyes, but he stopped and sent a guard to come search her anyways. He looked through her apron roughly, until he found the letter. He immediately opened and read it, then he gave it to the man in charge. The man quickly read it and scoffed. Then he looked towards her skeptically.

"Perhaps we should take her to the King and let him give the command about her then. But imprison the rest right away." He said, almost sounding disappointed.

The man holding her nodded. "Very well."

Lila's legs suddenly felt a bit wobbly from her relief. Had she barely escaped a cruel fate just now? She really could not handle any more stress than this today!

One man took her by the arm and started leading her towards the west wing back to the King, while the rest of the guards headed towards the dungeon with Zacchaeus and his men. Lila watched with satisfaction as they were lead to face the same fate Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson had suffered. They deserved no better than what they themselves had put others through.

The walk was quiet as the guard led Lila towards the west wing. Her heart was still beating anxiously, but she supposed it would go away soon enough. As the two of them neared the end of the hallway she noticed two more guards appear from the other end. For some reason though they gave her a sudden uneasy feeling. In fact, when they got closer she felt the hair on her neck stand up.

"Run!" She shouted to the guard with her, realizing just what was about to happen.

The man looked at her with confusion, but it was too late. As soon as they were within range the men from the hallway attacked. The King's guard fought back as Lila was knocked aside to the ground. She watched as her escort took out one traitor and tried to fend off the second.

Lila quickly tried to call for help, but when she looked back she saw that Zacchaeus's guards had also been attacked the wicked man set free. She watched helplessly as all the betrayers started fleeing down the hall.

Lila got up and was about to run away from her escorts fight, but the traitorous guard suddenly grabbed her arm. She turned back and saw the King's guard on the ground, nearly unconscious. She tried to pull away from her captor but her hands were still tied and he refused to let her go.

"Stop struggling or else I will kill you wench!" He sneered angrily.

"NO! Let me go! HELP!" Lila screamed as she tried fighting against the man.

He grunted with frustration and picked her up in an effort to carry her away easier, but the King's guard suddenly hopped back to his feet and grabbed Lila's other arm and pulled out his sword in the same instant. He swung fearlessly at the traitor and yanked her away from him. The man immediately let Lila go and took his last chance to run away.

Her escort then leaned against the wall, looking too worn out and dizzy to chase down the criminal, his arm looking heavily injured.

"Thank you." Lila sighed, feeling very woozy all of a sudden.

In fact, she felt much like she was going to pass out. She carefully took one deep breath after another to calm herself. But the overwhelmingly anxiety over everything that had happened today was fighting to consume her.

Lila let out another breath slowly. She was tired, hungry, and absolutely exhausted. This had been the longest night of her life, and certainly the most frightening too! She did not know how much more she could take.

Suddenly, everything around her started fading away. It was like much like falling down the hole in a well, darkness engulfing her view.

"Ma'am!" The guard said with alarm as she fainted.

Westan was waiting at the entrance of his door anxiously. It was still too dangerous for him to leave his room, so Garret sent for Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson to be brought to them instead.

Westan was trying to think of how best to apologize to them for all the misunderstanding. He wanted to give them a large amount of money, and perhaps a noble title for their efforts. They deserved even more than that though since their loyal actions had saved his very life. But this surely was the least he could in spite of everything.

Westan could see the guards coming around the corner now. They were bringing Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson with their faces covered and hands still tied.

"Let them loose!" He commanded.

As soon as the guards reached him they made both men kneel as they uncovered their heads and quickly untied their hands.

Westan gasped in shock and his heart felt a terrible pang of pain.

"Bartholomew, Mr. Jameson!" He whispered with horror.

Both men looked bruised and battered, completely exhausted, and absolutely terrified. They didn't even have enough strength to hold themselves up and fell to the floor as soon as the guards took their hands off of them.

It was then that Westan realized just how much they must have really gone through. After all, the two of them had spent the night in the dungeon at the mercy of Zacchaeus's men, and had almost died as convicted criminals just a few moments ago! How terrifying it all must have been for them, especially since neither had known his and Lila's plans to rescue

them. Right now both men probably wanted nothing more than to be free of a cruel tyrant like him!

Westan felt an ache in his heart. Did he really think any amount of money or prestige could ever make up for what he had done to the two of them? He had carelessly hurt both of them, and who knew how many others because of his own ignorance! He could never expect them, or anyone else to ever forgive him for it.

Westan slumped to the ground with shame.

"I am sorry Bartholomew, Mr. Jameson! I did not know the truth about Zacchaeus! I am sorry; this is all my fault!" He shouted angrily.

Bartholomew tried to push himself back up and say something, but his voice was too weak it seemed.

"That is enough, do not try to speak!" Westan said anxiously.

He quickly turned to Garret. "Take these men to my doctor and have them cared for in any way possible! Quickly!"

The man nodded. Then he had two nearby guards come over and take both Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson to the royal infirmary to be treated.

"My King look!" Garret said as he pointed to a young man who coming towards them.

He was a young guard, and he was carrying a lifeless looking Lila.

"What happened!?" Westan asked with a sudden wave of new worry.

When the man reached them he bowed his head and spoke swiftly.

"My Lord, some of Zacchaeus's men came and ambushed us. They all got away except for her!" He said.

"What!?" Garret roared angrily.

"But is she alright?" Westan snapped impatiently.

The man nodded. "She just appears to have fainted."

Westan let out a long sigh of relief. At least she was alive. Then he looked and noticed the young man's wound, as well as his weakened appearance.

"Get this man a doctor as well, and take Lila to a room to rest up. Make sure to have the servants take good care of her and keep her safe." Westan ordered.

Garret called over two more men and one escorted the injured man to the guard's infirmary while the other carried a still unconscious Lila away.

"I will need to go and question him right away. We cannot let that traitorous snake get away!" Garret said through gritted teeth.

Westan nodded. "Zacchaeus was prepared even for this."

How many of his own guards did that useless betrayer have working for him? It was absolute ludicrous! It seemed Zacchaeus had gotten even more powerful than they realized.

Chapter 11- A Change of Heart

When Lila woke up she was in a large and beautiful room, lying in a bed of soft pillows and frilly sheets, surrounded by expensive looking decorations, and the last thing she could remember was Zacchaeus and his men escaping! Just where on earth was she now?

Lila sat up and looked around the room curiously. It was quite spacious, with a lovely painted ceiling high above her depicting a beautiful hand painted creek and meadow. There were dark blue curtains hanging from the tall glass windows that led out to a balcony which faced the garden. Then near the entrance of the room she saw two large marble pillars trimmed in gold, with two large ivory colored doors that had the royal crest situated above them. She wondered why she was in bedroom that was truly fit for a princess! And where was the King? She had to find him as soon as possible and relay all that had happened!

Lila quickly went to leave the room, but when she opened the doors by the marble pillars she found that they only led into a grand dressing room. It too was decorated richly, with wardrobes and paintings everywhere.

She sighed. Just how big was this place anyway? Why this room alone was bigger than he whole house!

Lila turned back and began walking around in search of another door, hoping to find a hallway of some sort. But she suddenly stopped with a gasp, catching sight of herself in a large dressing mirror on the wall. Until

that moment Lila had all but forgotten about her very short haired appearance.

Lila quickly turned away from her reflection, unable to bear the pain of her new and unfeminine looking self. She had never been very feminine or pretty to begin with, but now she could positively be mistaken for a boy! And besides that, her father always said her long hair reminded him of her mother. What would he say when she went back home looking like this? Lila had never felt so embarrassed by her own appearance, and for a brief moment she started to cry. Deep down she knew it was silly to be upset over such a trivial thing, but Lila just couldn't help but feel ashamed right now.

"Is something wrong Milady?" A voice full of worry suddenly asked.

Lila spun around startled, only to see a servant woman coming towards her with a large tray of food. She was short and plump, with red cheeks and a grey hair pulled back in a bun. Her face was very kind and warm seeming.

"Whatever is the matter?" She asked gently.

Lila blushed and looked away, not wanting to worry whoever this woman was. But then she saw her reflection once more and unintentionally let out a depressed sigh. She wondered if it would ever grow back to the length she had before.

The woman swiftly came over and set the tray of food down on the dressing table next to the mirror. Then she looked at Lila with an understanding smile.

"Now, now, no need to fret. We can fix you up in a jiffy." She said warmly.

"Just who are you, and where am I?" Lila asked warily.

The woman smiled. "I am Dita, and the King has put me in charge of you so do not worry. Now eat up miss, you must be hungry."

Lila eyed at the delicious looking food on the tray. There was a plate of roast chicken and potatoes, with a large piece of chocolate cake and a cup of wine to go with it. She was indeed feeling quite ravenous and didn't need to be told what to do twice. She quickly ate the food given her, and it was positively the best food she ever had. Everything tasted so rich and full of butter, spices, salt, and milk. She wondered if it had come from the King's own private kitchen.

When Lila finished eating and the feeling of hunger and danger left her, the thoughts of her hair and unfeminine appearance began to depress her again. What would Daphne, or Tam and the other maids say when they saw her? Would they laugh at her and tease her? She had already been called horse-face, so things could only get worse.

The servant woman let out a small sigh.

"Come now Miss, that is enough dwelling. You need to get cleaned up."

She said.

Lila nodded and got up to follow the woman through another set of doors in the room that opened up to a large and beautiful washroom. Tall glass windows ran along the room's wall letting in plenty of sunlight. Sheer curtains hung from them, preventing anyone from being able to see in and giving the room a very private feel despite its view of the outside. There was also a large frilly couch in the room with a delicate looking tea table beside it, as well as an area with an ivory changing screen. But the centerpiece of the room was surely the washtub. It was very exquisite, being made of thick pink glass and shaped like a large rose, with one of the petals lowered to the ground with steps carved into it for a person's entry. Lila had never seen anything quite its craftsmanship before. It positively looked like something out of a fairytale!

“Come now Miss, we best get the bath water ready.” The servant woman said.

Lila frowned. “Are you quite sure I should even be in this room? This all looks like something set up for a noblewoman or princess, but I am just a maid who works here the same as you!”

Dita shook her head with a smile. “Why Miss! The King himself gave the order to have you cared for in any way possible, so you need not worry yourself.”

Lila gasped with shock. *The King*, have *her* cared for in *any way* possible? Well that did not sound like something he would do at all.

“Are you quite ready for a bath now?” The servant woman asked, looking a bit impatient.

Lila nodded slowly, supposing the woman’s words must be true, for she was indeed here with a servant tending to her. So she followed Dita’s lead and watched carefully as the woman poured pre-heated buckets of hot water into the tub which filled the room with warm steam. Afterwards she added rose petals and scented oils to the water, making the whole room smell quite fragrant. Then she took Lila over to the changing screen and had her take off her clothes and put on warm robe before she brought her back over to the bathtub and motioned for her to get in.

Lila was a bit nervous by the prospect of getting into a *warm* bath. She had never had such an experience before, as such luxuries as this were only attainable for the wealthy. Carefully she bent down and felt the water with her hand first, curious as to its temperature. It was more than lukewarm, but not too hot on her skin. So she took off the robe and slowly stepped in the tub with her feet. A strange sensation washed over her legs and sent a surprisingly relaxing feeling all through her body. Lila almost giggled at the surprisingly and comforting feeling of it all. Then once she got used to the

temperature she slowly sat down in the center of the flower shaped tub, letting the warm water completely cover and sooth her aching body.

Lila let out a relaxed sigh. So this is how rich people lived! Indeed, she could see the appeal of having a luxury such as this! She wondered if cold baths would ever feel the same to her again. She spent the next half hour washing herself and enjoying her once in a lifetime warm bath, but after a while the water started cooling down. Dita beckoned for her to get out, and eventually Lila was coerced out of the water. She received a towel to dry herself off, after which she was given another thin robe to wear. Then the woman brought her back to the dressing room and had her sit down in front of the mirror. She refused to look at her own shameful reflection as the maid started trimming her jagged hair in an effort to fix the uneven cutting she had made.

"Thank you very much Ma'am. I appreciate all your care today." Lila said quietly.

The woman laughed. "No need to thank me Miss, I am happy to care for and serve all of the King's most honored guests."

Lila blushed. *Now she was an honored guest?* What an embarrassing way to be viewed! Not that Lila was complaining about the care she had received, after all she truly had enjoyed herself today. But she just felt it was all a bit unnecessary, since she was just a servant girl who had been trying to prove two men's innocence.

"There, all done!" The woman suddenly announced.

Lila reluctantly turned and looked at herself in the mirror. Well her hair certainly looked better than before, since it had been made even looking. But the shorter her hair was the tighter her curls got, so right now Lila looked as if she had a red tumbleweed on her head for hair.

She sighed and looked away again. She supposed she would just have to wear a bonnet on her head until the hair grew back properly.

"Oh do not be so downhearted! Your hair is quite lovely! Most noblewoman would kill to have such lovely curls by nature. Come now Miss, let us get you into some dry clothes." The woman said gently.

Lila got up and followed the woman over to the changing screen again to get dressed. But waiting there on a clothing stand was a lovely blue gentlewoman's dress, with her own clothes nowhere in sight.

"I am afraid I do not see my clothes; did I misplace them?" Lila asked, looking around again.

The woman giggled. "Please Milady, I cannot possibly allow you to put the clothes of a servant back on! You are a guest of the King himself now."

Lila blushed wildly, realizing the elegant and uncomfortable looking garment might just be here on purpose.

"But I cannot possibly wear *that* dress!" She protested.

The woman shook her head. "Well I suppose you will remain in that robe then, for there is nothing else for you to wear besides this."

Lila looked at the dress for a moment. It was a pale blue color and trimmed in white lace, with blue ribbons and bows everywhere, something that would look extremely ridiculous on a country girl like her.

"Please Ma'am, this is simply not appropriate for someone like me!" Lila protested again.

Dita frowned with disappointment.

"Look Miss, we can do this the easy way, or the hard way." She said.

Lila scowled and crossed her arms defiantly.

"Then it is to be the hard way, for I am positively NOT going to wear this." She replied.

"Are you sure about this?" Westan asked the informant.

The guard nodded. "Yes, I am sure Zaccheus will use that secret passage. It is the only way that leads out to the market square where it is easy to blend in with the crowds."

Garret grunted. "No one is to allow any man, woman, or child, to leave the castle's gate. Zacchaeus will not be able to escape us this time."

Westan nodded. Indeed, there was nowhere left to run. His guards had already been sent to block off any exits or passages that led outside the castle. It was only a matter of time before Zaccheus was caught and charged for the crimes he had committed.

"Very well, go and prepare everyone, each man should be ready for anything. I will not tolerate another successful ambush or escape by the enemy." Garret said.

The informant bowed obediently and left right away to relay the message.

Westan rubbed his forehead. This had been a very long and extremely tiresome day. What he would give to have a relaxing nap and be able to forget all of these trouble for a bit.

Just then, he heard a sigh from the other end of the room. He turned and looked over at the group of guards who had betrayed him last night. They were sitting in the corner under another guard's careful watch, all of them still tied up and gagged. They had not been taken to the dungeon yet for fear they too would escape and aid Zacchaeus in his escape.

But Westan could not help but wonder about the young boy on the right. His head was hung in despair and he looked completely hopeless. He was the one who tried to fight against the traitors to free Lila and him. The boy was young, and could not be more than perhaps sixteen years old. He was no doubt frightened by his imminent fate for his unforgivable actions.

Westan sighed. He did not want him punished as severely as the rest, for the boy had sincerely been surprised by the traitors when they attacked him. But the boy had still been working for Zacchaeus, and that made Westan curious.

"Garret, bring me that young man over there. I have a few questions for him." He said.

The man nodded and went over to the tied up traitors. The boy suddenly started shaking with fear as he was grabbed and dragged over to where Westan sat. Garret put his sword to his back and made him bow before removing his gag to speak. The young man bowed low and then looked up at them both nervously.

"What is your name?" Westan asked.

"I-Ivan, my Lord." The boy said with a trembling voice that was barely louder than a whisper.

"Why were you taking orders from my counsel man?" He asked curiously.

The boy gulped and spoke with his eyes to the floor. "I apologize my King! I only accepted the position because he offered me plenty of money! You see I have six siblings to care for and feed! I was only ordered to report on your daily behavior; I had no idea it would lead to a rebellion!"

"I see." Westan replied, taking the information in thoughtfully.

Then the boy suddenly looked up at him and spoke again.

"I accept any penalty of yours my King, but please, spare my family any punishment! I know I deserve nothing but I assure you that they knew nothing of my treachery at all! I beg of you to show them mercy! I know I deserve death but please spare their lives!" He begged with a tearful face.

Westan looked at him for a moment with shock. Of course he would never do that! To think that this boy actually thought that he would punish innocent children for whatever crime he committed just because they were related by blood! But it seemed that *was* the kind of person Zaccheus had him depicted him as. Or maybe, that really *was* the type of person he had been once.

Westan examined the boy again with scrutiny, thinking of what he should do. He certainly did seem sincerely sorry for what he had done, and his information had proven useful. But still, *something* had to be done with him.

"Because you did try to defend and save me, I will spare your life." He said.

Both Garret and Ivan looked up at him with surprise and shock, but Westan ignored their looks and quickly continued.

"But you will have to pay for your crimes, so from now on you will be my own personal servant, my most dedicated slave. You *will* do all of my private bidding and be at my beck and call, without any question or hesitation. You will not dare disobey or betray me again in any way, or I will revoke this merciful sentence." He declared.

The boy's anxious face suddenly became confused, as if he had perhaps misheard. Garret also looked perplexed and started glaring at Westan with disapproval. But he ignored them both again and continued once more.

"Until I feel you have redeemed yourself you will not be permitted to leave the castle for any reason. You may write your siblings to explain your

absence to them, or they may come and stay here if need be. Any future earnings of yours will be decided by Garret, and they shall be based on how well you perform the tasks I give you." Westan finished.

The boy's expression immediately changed from one of utter shock to absolute relief. He could not even seem to make any sort of reply.

"Do you agree to live by these terms?" Westan asked seriously.

The boy nodded fervently, looking more grateful by the second.

"My Lord, I do not feel this is wise." Garret said with great disdain.

Westan shook his head. "But this boy tried to protect me when the rest of the men attacked us. Although he worked for Zacchaeus he does not deserve the same treatment as the others."

The man grunted with aggravation. "Very well, if that is what you wish then sire. But he cannot be alone with you at any time!"

"That is fine. I trust he will behave himself though." Westan said.

Garret shook his head. "You can never expect such an outcome for a known traitor."

Westan smiled. "Alright, relax Garret, we have taken precautions and given him proper warning. Now untie him quickly, I have a task he can perform right away."

Garret nodded and bent down over to the boy as he took out a knife and started cutting the ropes on his hands.

"If you make one false step or even *think* about running away, I will hunt you down and make you wish you had been executed with the rest of these men instead!" He threatened very seriously.

The young man's face went pale and he nodded with understanding. Then as soon as he was free he came and bowed in front of Westan with his face on the ground.

"Th-thank you my King! You are good and gracious! I know I do not deserve such mercy!" He exclaimed, sounding almost as if he was in tears now.

"Yes very good. Now then, about my task." Westan said.

"Yes of course, whatever you wish me to do sire! I am your servant, your slave!" The boy replied.

Westan smiled slightly, quite proud of his decision for a change. He was going to work hard to be a better King and change the image Zaccheus had painted of him.

"Please, get me out of this thing *now!*" Lila said breathlessly.

She knew corsets were a fashion statement in Gam, but how any woman ever wore them for longer than about ten second she didn't know! This stupid dress was so constricting that Lila could hardly even move let alone breathe!

"But it looks so wonderful on you Milady!" The servant woman, whose name was Dita, said with a squeal.

"I do not care I can barely catch my breath! I cannot possibly wear this horrible garment any longer!" Lila snapped, feeling quite irritated by her lack of air.

"As I said before, there is nothing else for you to put on." The maid replied with arms folded.

"But-" Lila began.

The woman quickly cut her off. "Now, now, it is not that bad. Besides, I am sure you will certainly become fond of it if you just give it a chance."

Then she turned and walked away, clearly not willing to discuss a change of clothes anymore. Lila scowled and flopped down in the nearest chair. Well sort of; it was more like just sitting down quickly, for the corset kept Lila's back perfectly straight no matter what she did or how she moved. She actually felt unable to breathe deeply in it too, so it felt like she wasn't getting quite enough air. This made her feel slightly light headed.

She really had not wanted to put the dress on in the first place, but after a couple of hours wearing nothing more than a thin robe Lila knew she needed to wear something in order to leave the confines of her guest room. After all, she could not see the King or check up on Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson dressed in a bath robe! But now that she had come to put the dress on there was no possible way to get it off.

Dita came back into the room with a brush in one hand and some hair pins in the other. She came over and started pulling the coarse brush through Lila's hair, not an easy or painless process for either of them. But eventually the maid was able to tame her wildly short and frizzy curls into some ringlet locks, which she pinned back with the blue hairpins. She also insisted on adding a blue necklace to the outfit, and a bit of makeup to her face. Lila was not fond of any of these ideas, but since she could hardly move it was hard to resist.

After about an hour or so Dita finished dolling her up, and Lila turned to look in the mirror once again. She barely even recognizing her own reflection this time and nearly screamed when she saw herself. The gentlewoman's dress made her figure thinner and almost attractive, while the makeup enhanced the appearance of her face and hid most of her freckles, and the ringlets encircled her face quite elegantly and even looked

becoming. She actually looked like a proper young lady right now, one who had never seen the work of a farmer and had servants to wait on *her*!

"Please, that is enough. No more!" She said with horror.

Dita laughed. "Now, now, do not be silly Miss. You look positively wonderful!"

"No! I cannot stay here any longer! I must go now and speak with the King!" Lila said desperately.

The woman smiled apologetically.

"I am sorry you feel that way Miss, but the King must first summon you before you can speak with him." She said.

Lila frowned. "And how long is that going to take?"

Dita shook her head. "I am sorry, but I do not know."

"So let me send a letter to him asking for a summon." Lila replied.

The maid shook her head again. "Miss that would not be appropriate at all!"

"Oh I do not have time for this!" She snapped, standing up to leave.

The woman made no move as Lila stormed across the room to the door. She swung it open and went to walk out, but a tall and muscular guard stood in her way.

"Sorry Milady, you are not permitted to leave these quarters yet." He said.

Lila was in shock. "*Not permitted?* So now I am not even allowed to leave this room?"

The man nodded seriously. "Yes ma'am. I have orders to keep you safe and well cared for as one of the King's special guests."

"But you are treating me more like a prisoner! I demand that you let me pass!" She snapped angrily.

"Miss, this is no way for a Lady to act!" Dita said as she came over and grabbed her by the arm.

Lila's face blushed with fury. "I am NOT a Lady! Now let me go, I have to speak with the King! I have to leave!"

The man laughed. "You have spunk lassie! But I am afraid that I cannot let you leave without the King's approval, and until the traitors are caught he and his men will be very busy."

Lila raised an eyebrow. "So, I am stuck here until he captures Zaccheus *and then* summons me, is that what you are saying?"

The man smiled and nodded. "I am sorry Miss."

Lila sighed angrily. She was regretting her decision to help the King more and more with each passing minute!

She turned and stormed back in the room and flopped back down in her chair. The man burst out in laughter as Dita shut the door and came back over to her.

"We must be patient Miss that is all. The King will see you when he can." She said with a warm smile.

Lila rolled her eyes. Just what was he thinking, having her set up in a room like this? And why could she not leave or even see him? How long would it be until she would be released? Just how did she end up as a pampered prisoner of a guest?

The next day Westan put on his regal cloak and his father's gold necklace, planning to wear them every day from now on no matter the

occasion. He decided that if wanted to act more like a proper King he should look more like one too. When Westan looked in the mirror that morning he was immediately reminded of his father. He had always dressed this same way as well, looking like a strong King and standing with dignity at all times. He remembered standing by his father's side in the mornings as the servants would dress him. They would talk and laugh and play around. Westan would imitate his stance in the mirror or insist on wearing something that matched. When the servants got annoyed and tried to send him away, his father would always allow him to stay a little while longer. Sometimes he would even put Westan on his lap and let him wear the crown. He used to say it would be his someday and that he would be a great King like all his forefathers. How wrong his father had been though.

"Oh father..." Westan said with a sad sigh.

Suddenly a knock came at the door and pulled from his thoughts. He quickly put on his crown and came around from his changing curtain and sat in his desk chair, trying to look strong and dignified. Garret, who was still keeping him company, stood up from his seat and went over to check the door.

"Who is it?" He asked.

"It is Ivan my Lord!" A voice said.

"Very good, come in." Westan said, trying to sound mature and collected like his father.

Garret immediately opened the door and the boy scrambled in with a deep bow.

"My King, important news pertaining to Zaccheus!" He announced.

Westan shot up from his seat and Garret became tense.

"Well spit it out boy!" The man snapped.

"He was seen trying to escape the castle's wall through a secret route, but your forces intercepted and they were all taken into custody!" He said in a rush.

"I knew it would be just so!" Garret said with a pleased smile.

Westan let out a sigh though, as he did not feel this was truly a victory of any sort. At least not yet.

"Where is he?" He asked.

"He was immediately taken to the dungeon and placed within a secure cell, sire! Then I was sent back to tell you right away!" The boy replied.

He figured as much. This wasn't going to be easy then.

"I want to see him." Westan declared.

Garret turned to him in surprise.

"My Lord, we cannot possibly take the risk of bringing him here to you for some sort of justification; it is far too dangerous!" He protested.

Westan nodded. Yes, he knew all this. But he wanted to face the man who killed his parents and lied to him for the past nine years. The man who tried to have him killed and steal his kingdom. He was going to face Zaccheus and punish him personally.

"Indeed, I must go to him then." He declared.

"Must I wear a dress every day?" Lila asked, feeling out of breath and unhappy in another very tight corset.

The servant woman smiled. "Why you get so upset I shall not understand, for you look positively lovely in them!"

"But it is absolutely unbearable to wear! How can a woman be expected to talk and walk when she cannot breathe?" She retorted.

Dita's face suddenly became cross. "Miss, this is no way for a Lady to act!"

"I am NOT a Lady!" Lila snapped.

The woman frowned. "Nonsense. You could be, if only you would act like one."

"Oh never mind." Lila sighed with defeat, too breathless to expend any more energy arguing.

She had spent all of yesterday and last night in this guest room, and even today the King still had not summoned her yet. Had he forgotten about her perhaps? Or was he just trying to tease her like he usually did? Lila didn't know, and she really didn't care. She just wanted to get out of here already! Dita was overbearing, the clothes were torturous, and the confinement was tiresome. She was also wondering about Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson. She knew they had been rescued, but where were they now? Were they alright? The stress of their interrogations and the execution must have also taken its toll on them. And she truly could not wait to apologize for having falsely condemning their traitorous actions. Hopefully once she explained the circumstances to them they would understand why she did it. So many things she needed to say and do, and all of them waiting on her release!

After a little while Dita came over to her with a small basket of lacy looking materials.

"Perhaps you should pass the time by engaging in some feminine hobbies." She said warmly.

Lila looked down at the very obvious collection of sewing materials.

"I hate sewing you know." She mumbled miserably.

"Come now Milady, it is not so bad. You merely need practice at it." The woman said with a smile.

Lila sighed. Needle point had never really been one of her skills, even when it came to patching clothing. But she supposed even something boring was better than having nothing to do. So she picked up a piece of cloth and a silver needle and began twiddling away.

However, it only took about ten minutes for Lila to immediately regret her decision. The needle was quite sharp, and she was constantly poking her fingers causing her to ruin more than one piece of fabric. But when she wasn't bleeding out on the cloth she was busy creating crooked and disfigured lines of a horrendous nature. Although, she supposed it was harder than normal to anything when you felt like you were suffocating in a dress that was too tight. The wretched little napkin she was currently working on looked just terrible! But Dita was determined for her to become skilled at this, and she many times refused to bring Lila anything else to do until the napkin was completed. So Lila picked it back up and tried again and again. Finally, she had some sort of finished product, but it was truly too pitiful to be seen or kept.

"Well, your skills could use improvement." Dita said with a bit of disappointment.

Lila sighed. "I told you I am not good at needle point!"

The woman shook her head. "Practice makes anything perfect! We shall just have to try it again."

"Again!?" Lila gasped with horror.

"Miss, have you no pride in your work? Honestly, I am sure you can do better than this if only you would try a little harder." The maid said, shaking her head.

Lila scoffed and took another blank napkin. She supposed there was nothing better to do right now anyways. She just hoped the next hobby was less boring at least. At any rate, if the King did not call her by this afternoon Lila would just come up with some kind of escape plan.

Chapter 12- Facing Your Fears

"I SAID TO LET ME PASS!" Westan shouted with rage.

Garret shook his head as he blocked the exit to his chambers persistently.

"But my Lord, it is not acceptable for you to enter into the castle dungeon!" He stated anxiously.

"I do not care! I thank you for all you have done thus far, but I command you to stand aside!" Westan snapped.

The man looked uneasy, yet still he did not move.

"Your Majesty, it is not acceptable for *the King* to enter where lowly prisoners are kept! Besides that, it is far too dangerous for you to be out in the open with Zaccheus's men lurking about!" He said with great concern.

Westan clenched his fists. *He* was the King and this was *his* castle, so *he* could go wherever *he* wanted to! He had been held here by Garret against his will once before, but he would not be contained again. Just who did this man think he was anyways?

"Why is it that you think it is acceptable to disobey one of my direct orders? How dare you try to stand in my way!" Westan yelled angrily.

Garret remained silent for a moment. He looked torn between his desire to protect him, and to serve obediently. Then he lowered his stance and let out a long sigh.

"My Lord, you are certainly most welcome in any part of your own castle. Please forgive my impudence. I was only concerned with your safety. But now please allow me to be your escort there." He said in a most humble way.

Westan immediately felt bad about yelling. He knew Garret was only doing his best to keep him safe amidst so much conspiracy. But no matter

the risk he *had* to go and see Zacchaeus for himself; the man who betrayed him so completely! He would be sure to work out this argument with Garret later.

"Very well, let us head there now." Westan said.

"As you wish my King." The man replied.

Before they started towards the main floor of the castle, Garret had to make preparations. He arranged for four guards to accompany them, and he also sent for an even larger group of men to meet them at the dungeon. Once everyone was in place they left his chambers and made their way downstairs.

Westan had never been to the dungeon before, and was embarrassed to realize that he did not even know where it was! He supposed that he merely never felt the need to know before, but as the King he really should know his entire castle's layout thoroughly. Westan would be sure to study a map later though.

It turned out the dungeon was located near the entrance where the servants and supply carts were brought in, a place Westan had never been before. He saw a great variety of people working, but as soon as they saw him every last one of them seemed to clear out of the way of his view.

Westan sighed. He used to think it was funny when people ran away in fear of him, but now he just found it depressing. He knew now that despite him never actually doing anything to harm anyone Zaccheus had been doing it plenty enough behind his back for many years, and in his name too. If the rumors circling about him made even someone Lila afraid, then they truly must be terrible indeed.

"Do not worry my Lord, these people are just a bit wary from all the commotion with Zacchaeus and his men." Garret said in an encouraging manner.

Westan just shook his head. There was no need for this man to try and make him feel better, these people had good reason to fear him the way they did. He was indeed a careless, unfeeling, and selfish young man of a King. But that would not be the case for long. Westan was going to fix and undo all of the harm his council man had produced in his name.

After a few minutes they neared a dark hallway that had about ten guards standing by. Westan guessed this was where the dungeon was located. They were all just standing and conversing, but when they say that Garret and the King were coming everyone became silent and stood up a bit straighter. When they reached the group all the men gave a deep bow.

"Your Majesty, Sir!" They greeted them both in unison.

"Are my men guarding the traitor as ordered?" Garret asked.

One of the guards quickly replied.

"Yes Sir! Two groups of ten men are rotating their watch between the prisoner and the walkways!" He said.

Garret nodded, looking quite pleased.

"Good. But be warned, any man caught standing around casually among such danger will be punished." He said with a raised eyebrow.

All of the men's eyes widened with fear, knowing he was mentioning their previous casual conversing.

"Yes Sir!" They replied in unison.

"Good. Now get into formation and open the doors! His Majesty requests entrance to the dungeon." Garret said.

Everyone bowed and obeyed. Ten of the men surround them both, and two of them prepared to open a large metal door. One of them took out a key and unlocked the door while the other grabbed a torch to lead the way with. Westan immediately stepped forward and down the stairs curiously. The entrance was dim and foggy, with nothing visible past the first few

steps. It gave him a strange and chilling feeling, even making a slight shiver go down his spine.

After a moment Garret gave everyone their orders, and then he began leading the way down into the dungeon's dimly lit tunnel. Two men followed behind him to keep in front of Westan, and about ten men would follow in back of him. Every other man held a torch to light the way in front and behind.

Westan took a deep breath and took his first step towards where all the criminals of the castle were kept. It was an awfully dark walk, and after a few more steps it became a smelly one too. There was a terribly wretched stench wafting over Westan from who knows where, a smell which could only be described as rotten garbage. A few times it almost made him start gagging.

"What is that horrid smell?" He finally demanded, almost gagging again as he spoke.

Garret shouted back to him. "My Lord, I remind you that this is the way to the dungeon."

Westan scoffed. "That is no excuse! This is *my* prison, and this is unacceptable! Honestly, how can anyone concentrate when they have to deal with this?"

"As you wish my King, we can correct such matters later." The man assured.

Westan scowled. Indeed, they *would* fix this! He could not even believe that such a dirty place existed inside his father's beautiful castle! He actually had to hold his cloak over his face in order to drown out the stink, although it didn't help too much. Twice he had to stop because he came close to vomiting. His stomach just kept churning and feeling so sour. After

a moment he had to stop and rest. Garret quickly stopped and walked back to meet him.

"Sire, please let me go and see to this in your place!" He said with worry.

"No! I need to do this myself! Do not coddle me, I can handle this just fine!" Westan replied with determination.

The man sighed with unease, but eventually he nodded. Then when he was ready to move again Garret returned to the front of the group to continue leading the way. But as they walked further the smell only increased. Westan just couldn't believe how bad the stench was! He was unable to imagine what the source of it could possibly be! Honestly, it smelled as if something or someone had died, and then rotted halfway. Not that he knew what such smelled like, but it seemed about right in his mind.

Just then, Westan though he saw a rat passing by his feet in the torch light. He almost let out a startled yell but with effort he was able to contain himself. Vermin now too? How filthy and disgusting was this place!?

Then Westan noticed that the deeper they got the colder and damper it felt too. He was starting to hear more rat squeaks, and as impossible as it seemed the smell on kept getting worse. Westan had to breathe through his mouth instead of his nose and could almost taste the stench. After a moment he had to stop and rest again to keep from throwing up. He tried to take a deep breath to regain composure, but the air was so damp that he found it hard to breath. It felt like he was swallowing wet garbage!

Westan was outraged. This place was absolutely horrid! It was unacceptable, even for lowly prisoners! How he wondered how Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson must have felt, being brought down here in the middle of the night after being dragged out of their rooms, falsely accused of conspiring to murder him. They had probably been confused,

frightened, and disturbed. Zacchaeus would defiantly pay for what he had put them through!

"We are almost there your Majesty." Garret stated.

Westan looked up and saw a bright light in the close distance. Finally! Now they were getting somewhere. And the sooner this was over the sooner he could get out of here!

As soon as he regained his strength the group continued forward. After a few moments they came to a halt in front of a wooden desk that had papers and empty mugs were strewn everywhere. An old man sat behind it with a very long and dirty looking beard.

"Who goes there, and what permissions do you have?" He asked in a raspy voice.

Westan stepped forward and removed the cloak from his face to talk, although he had to fight back another gag as he did so.

"We are here to see the traitor Zaccheus." He said with a bit of struggling.

When the guard behind the desk saw that he was the King, the old man immediately shot up from his chair and bowed.

"Indeed, we have captured that traitorous snake my Lord! He is being kept in the lowest level of the dungeon under intense surveillance!" He said with a bit of pride.

Westan nodded. "Please, show the way then."

The man bowed again, looking incredibly honored. Then he took a large key from his waist and opened another large metal door, which obviously led to the rest of the dungeon. It's screeching against the floor was very loud and sounded almost like a group of people screaming. Then Westan realized, it really was people screaming.

The conditions of the tunnel leading here had been nothing compared to what he was seeing now. Prisoners, unrecognizable by their dirty appearances, filled each small cell from wall to wall. As he walked through the hall the skinny people crammed themselves against their cell bars and pleaded for help, stretching out their hands for anything. The stench was almost unbearable now, and the sounds of howling filled the whole place so that Westan could not even hear himself think. He started feeling sick again.

Suddenly a prisoner grabbed hold of Westan's cloak, yanking him into the people's hands. Immediately the fabric of the cloak tightened around his throat and started to choke him. Westan quickly tried to untie it, but among so many hands he was not able to. Garret pulled out his sword as quick as a flash and came towards the prisoners, ready to cut anything off in order to save him. They all let Westan go and the guards came and pulled him to safety.

"You good for nothing cretins!" A guard yelled.

He walked over and pulled out his sword angrily, pushing it through the bars and scaring the half starving and desperate looking people inside.

"Disgusting rats the lot of you are! How dare you touch his Majesty with your filthy hands! I should hang you all for that! Or maybe I will just forget your food for the next week!" He threatened.

"ENOUGH!" Westan shouted to him.

The people's eyes were large with fear and desperation. They were all starving, cold, and abused. This is how his prisoners were treated, this is how Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson had been treated.

"My Lord it is not safe in here. Please, I beg you to let us handle your task!" Garret pleaded.

Westan wanted to agree to that more than anything right now. He desperately wanted to leave and run back to his safe and comfortable room!

But he knew that wouldn't be right. He had to face Zaccheus for himself, and see what the man had been doing in his ignorance.

Westan hopped up to his feet and started giving out commands.

"You two!" He said, pointing at two of the guards.

"Yes?" The men bowed.

"I want food and water, as well as blankets given to all the people here immediately." He said.

They both looked at one another with shock and confusion.

"You heard me!" Westan shouted. "These conditions are not acceptable!"

The men hesitated, but Garret suddenly spoke up to them.

"It is our duty to fulfill whatever the King commands. Go and do as he says!" He commanded.

Both men nodded. "Yes of course Sir!"

Westan smiled. "Good! Now go and get anything that can be found in the kitchen and bring it here to feed these people. Make sure that everyone gets an equal ration. Then tell the maids to bring blankets enough to cover them all, and pillows for their heads."

The men obeyed, although they could not hide the surprise on their faces.

"My Lord, are sure about this?" Garret asked, also looking unsure of such actions.

Westan nodded. "Yes. This prison is too terrible for words! I never knew anything could be this bad. I do not think it right to treat any kind of person this way, no matter how bad they are or their committed crimes!"

The man sighed with disapproval, but he nodded with compliance. "Very well, if that is what you wish."

Westan nearly blushed at the man's obvious annoyance. He knew very well that this may seem to be a foolish or naive thing to do, but this was *his*

prison and these people were *his* prisoners, and *he* would do as *he* pleased! Besides, how could he even be sure that everyone here truly deserved a prison sentence? There may be many innocent people like Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson down here because of Zaccheus! And the thought of such a truth only made his heart ache.

After a moment Garret was ready to lead the way again, with two guards behind him and only eight behind Westan now. He followed the men slowly, looking at each person they passed with scrutiny. They all looked about the same though: scrawny, frightened, and covered head to toe in muck. He even saw children in some of the cells!

Did he know any of them? Had he been the one to send them down here? Oh how the people must view him! Truly, only a merciless and cruel person would allow such harsh treatment of people! Now he understood what Lila had meant before about scary rumors and such. Surely she knew what the consequences might have been for her actions, yet she went through with them anyway! How much braver he viewed her now.

Just then, as he was passing by a lone cell, one man suddenly caught Westan's eye and pulled him from his thoughts. He was an old and rugged looking man, just as skinny and dirty as the rest. But he was not up against the cells begging for help, or laying on the ground too weak to move. He was just sitting in the corner, almost calmly, staring at him with very thoughtful eyes. When Westan met his gaze he suddenly stood up, looking at him with a very intriguing and tender expression.

Westan wondered if he knew the man. He surely must, for his eyes betrayed a look of familiarity. Had this man been a servant of his perhaps? He certainly did seem very familiar. However, Westan knew that he was too busy to stop right now. He would just have to remember this man later so he could properly investigate. So he turned away from the man

and focused on following Garret closely. He had plenty of work to do when he returned to his chambers like making the dungeon livable, so he was anxious to get this confrontation over with.

When they came to the third floor of the dungeon, Westan noticed that there were not as many people in each cell. This seemed to be where only special prisoners or those who were to be executed were kept. Speaking of which, he would also have to make sure no more executions were carried out until each prisoner was truly proved guilty.

Just then, Westan could see a group of about twenty guards in the distance standing around the last cell, a dim torchlight illuminating the area.

"Here we are. Be prepared." Garret warned him seriously.

Westan felt his breath catch, and his palms started to sweat. Now he wasn't so sure that he was ready to face his betrayer. Even though Zaccheus was *his* prisoner now, he still felt very nervous for some reason. Perhaps it was because this man had been the only person he had confided in and trusted for the past nine years of his life. Or maybe he worried sincere begging or apologizing might tempt him to have pity on the traitor who caused so much pain and suffering. Or more probable, Westan was just embarrassed because he had been so completely and easily deceived.

Eventually they reached the very last cell. When they did the guards took turns bowing at his presence, half continually keeping watch over Zaccheus at all times. Westan took a deep breath and braced himself as he walked over to view the cell. His betrayer sat chained to the dungeon wall, looking bruised all over. But he wore a wicked smile and almost looked to be expecting him.

"So, the King has decided to grace me with his grand presence?" He said with a dark chuckle.

Westan stared back at him calmly.

"I have come to punish you for all the wrongs you have done to both my people, and myself." He said.

The man smiled even wider. "So, the young brat is finally trying to act like a King!"

"And you are finally done being an imposter." He retorted.

Zacchaeus laughed loudly for a moment.

"I am glad you discovered me actually. It was so very tiresome to keep up my act all those years! I was sick of always having to treat you with fondness when I really just wanted you dead!" He said.

"SILENCE!" Garret shouted with his sword drawn.

Zaccheus did not appear the least bit worried by such threats, nor did he seem to regret his words. In fact, he even laughed some more.

Westan felt a terrible pang in his heat at his hurtful words. But he didn't want to let this man have the satisfaction of upsetting him. So he took a small breath and tried to maintain a calm composure.

"So, do you have anything to say for yourself before punishment is announced?" Westan asked with his crossed arms and his head held high.

Suddenly Zaccheus's grin turned into an angry frown.

"How dare you patronize *me!* You best kill me boy, or else I will escape and end your life with my very own hands!" He shouted with indignation.

Westan felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up, and Garret shifted nervously next to him as he gazed around the area for any sign of threat. But Westan could see that there was no confidence or arrogance in the man's eyes, only a crazed look of desperation as he thrashed around angrily. In the end though he was just a criminal, one who was in no way repentant for his actions.

"Actually, I think I have a better idea on how to deal with you." Westan stated, not satisfied by the idea of simply ending the man's life.

"Oh really? You have come up with it all on your own?" Zaccheus taunted with a chuckle.

"Indeed." Westan replied, liking his idea more with each passing second.

"Well?" The man asked impatiently.

"You will just have to wait and find out when the time comes. Although, I think even you will find it fitting." Westan said with a confident smile.

Then he turned and walked away without another word. Garret and the accompanying guards followed him while the patrols stayed behind. Westan refused to give Zaccheus the satisfaction of knowing his fate. He wanted his betrayer to ponder over his unknown sentence anxiously, he wanted him to be consumed with worry and regret until he went mad!

"Do you truly have a better idea than an execution?" Garret asked him quietly.

"Indeed. But I will tell you later, in private." Westan whispered.

The man nodded with understanding. "Very wise sire."

Just then Zaccheus called out after him in an effort to provoke some kind of answer.

"How dare you walk away from me like this! You ungrateful little brat!" He snapped.

Westan made no reply as he kept on walking. Garret looked ready to turn around and kill the man, but he restrained him. Westan did not want to give Zaccheus any kind of acknowledgment beyond this point, even a well-deserved punishment.

"You are not fit to sit on the throne, you never were! This Kingdom is better in the hands of a man like me than a spoiled child like you!" Zaccheus screamed after him angrily.

Westan took a deep breath to keep his nerves under control. He was not going to let this man get the better of him. He was in control now, not

Zaccheus!

Garret reached the door to ascend the dungeon, and Westan followed him through. But just as the door was being closed, his betrayer made one last attempt to taunt him.

"You father and mother begged for mercy when I killed them and your uncle watched it all helplessly! Then with *your* permission, I had him killed too! You are the reason they are all dead! EVERYTHING IS ALL YOUR FAULT!" The man shouted.

Westan came to a startled halt on the steps. Such horrible images flooded his mind, and the worst guilt he had ever felt washed over him. He so suddenly felt breathless and crushed.

"One of you go and make sure that snake gets a good beating!" Garret snapped to one of the men accompanying them.

Westan knew such actions would not make any difference now, Zaccheus had already accomplished exactly what he had wanted. Yes, the thought of his strong father and kind mother begging for their lives, and then his innocent uncle being framed for such a crime after having watched it all hopelessly was something that would torment his mind forever. And on top of all that, *he* had been the one to allow and even approve of his execution!

"Why? Why could I not have known?" Westan asked aloud with anger.

He was such a stupid fool! Westan had been the one to let a wicked man like Zaccheus completely take over his kingdom out of pure selfishness! As a prince he had always lived a sheltered life, and only ever thought about getting what *he* wanted whenever *he* wanted it. He never once thought to care about his people! Everyone would probably be better off if someone else was ruling instead of him right now.

"My Lord, do not listen to that traitorous man! He is nothing more than a deceitful cretin." Garret said.

"But what he says is true! I did give permission for him to execute my own uncle, then Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson! Who knows how many other innocent people I have punished ignorantly!" Westan snapped.

The man shook his head. "We all make mistakes, but dwelling on them will do little good."

Westan pushed him away. "I do not care what you have to say! I just do not want to be King anymore! I am leaving this castle and this life, forever!"

Garret suddenly looked at him in shock. "My Lord, please calm your-"

"Do not call me that! Never again must anyone address me with such titles!" He commanded.

The man looked very concerned, but he bowed in obedience.

"And stop bowing to me! I just want to be treated like a normal person from now on and *not* as the King!" Westan snapped with frustration.

Garret looked extremely confused by his behavior and was unsure how to react. The other guards also began glancing at one another awkwardly.

Westan felt his desperation increasing. They were never going to understand! And they were never going to treat him the way that he wanted! His only answer was to somehow leave this place, to run away from everything and start a new life!

Yes! Westan would escape the castle and let someone else could and take his place as King. It was a perfect idea actually! All he had to do was wait until late at night, then he would use a long rope to climb down his chamber's window and go out to the village. From there maybe he could ask Lila for some hel-

Just then Westan was reminded of the first time he met Lila. She was just a lowly cleaning servant, one who did her work with great pride. But surely a smart and brave girl like her wanted, and even deserved a better life than she lived. And what of Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson? They had been forced to come and work for him, but they never once complained about their positions!

Westan stood there, thinking deeply for a moment. Although he didn't like it, *he* was the King and it was *his* duty to run the country and make sure the people and land were cared for. For the past nine years he had neglected it out of resentment, and now he was planning to do the same out of fear. But such selfish thinking is what led to Zaccheus being able to rule in the first place! If Westan ran away now who was to say whether or not it would happen again? Would the person who replaced him feel the way he did about changing the dungeon and making sure all the people down there received justice? Would that person care about servants like Lila, Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson? There was no way Westan could be sure of such things! Unless of course he saw to them himself. Besides this, deep down he knew that his parents would want him to rule their kingdom like his father had, even if he could never be as good of a King.

Westan shook his head clear and took a deep breath. He was not perfect, but he supposed he should still try his best, at least for the sake of his parents, and all the people who have suffered due to his neglect. He truly wanted to make sure nothing like this ever happened again.

Westan turned back to Garret with a laugh.

"Please, forgive my outburst a moment ago. I suppose I am just feeling a little overwhelmed and tired." He said.

The man let out a very relieved sigh.

"Nothing to apologize for sire! Let us return you to your chambers so that you may rest." He said.

Westan nodded. He would just have to swallow his sorrows for the time being it seemed.

Chapter 13- New Discoveries

Lila took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. She was sitting out on the balcony, watching the far-off sunset. It was a very lovely view from up on the castle's second floor. From here she could see the light from the sun bathing the garden below, and even the snow covered mountains in the distance. She was truly in awe of such beauty. It was so calming to watch, and after a while she found herself feeling less tense about her situation.

Lila supposed instead of complaining about her stay here that she should just enjoy the reprieve and be grateful. She was experiencing many grand luxuries that she never would have been able to imagine even in all her wildest dreams. Although her restrictions were irritating, Lila had to honestly admit that her staying there wasn't all that bad. The servants had been treating her very well, even Dita. Besides, she understood the King had many things to take care of now that Zaccheus had betrayed him. And since she had sent home the money Bartholomew had given her before she need not worry about her father.

Lila would try to be more patient. Hopefully her stay here was sure not be too much longer, but even if it was she knew that the King would be sure to summon her as soon as he could. Then when she returned home to see her father, she would kiss his forehead and tell him how sorry she was for ever leaving and worrying him. Indeed, such thoughts gave her the strength to endure whatever may come.

Garret was leading the way back up the dungeon, and Westan was following behind him slowly, still quite lost in thought. He was pondering over all the improvements to the kingdom he wanted to make. He had come up with many good ideas and hoped that he would indeed be able to implement them. He no longer wanted people to be afraid of him! He wanted to be someone they could trust and be proud of. Yes, he wanted to be able to protect and care for all his kingdom's people, like his father before him had! Though it would probably take a considerable amount of time to undo all the damage Zaccheus had caused. Luckily though he had people like Lila and Garret who were still trustworthy. With their help he knew success was possible.

Eventually they reached the first floor and Westan took one last look around. He could see the guards had indeed brought them food and blankets. But the people all still looked quite frightened and miserable. Westan supposed he was just a spoiled brat for complaining about his royal all the time. He really needed to focus on helping other people who were in dire situations like this instead of his own problems.

Just then, as he was on his way out, Westan caught sight of the man from earlier, the one whom he seemed to recognize but not recall completely. He in turn just stared back at him again with eyes that spoke to Westan in a strange way. This time he was far too curious to ignore such a peculiar feeling. So he stopped Garret and had the guards clear a way to the man's cell.

The man watched as Westan slowly approached him, making sure not to get too close to the bars. The man gazed at him with kind and probing eyes, but he kept his distance and bowed in greeting.

"Who are you sir?" Westan asked curiously.

"Greetings my King! It is good to see you." He said with a small grin.

Westan was stunned for a moment. So they *did* know each other!

"Is that so?" He said, still not remembering his face.

The man smiled gently. "I am very glad to see you are doing well. You have grown quite tall I see."

Westan was in all astonishment. Just how long had it been since they had seen one another? And just how did they know each other again?

"Tell me who you are sir." Westan said again, overcome with curiosity.

The man's face suddenly grew troubled, and he did not answer. But somehow, he was seeming even more familiar to Westan.

"What is your name?" He demanded a third time.

The man shook his head. "Please do not inquire of such things, for I am of no consequence to you my Lord."

Westan folded his arms and came closer to the bars.

"*I* will inquire of whatever *I* so please, and *I* will decide what is of consequence to *me*. Now I demand you disclose your identity to me this instant!" He declared impatiently.

To his great surprise the man cracked a smile, in fact he almost laughed. Westan could see this man had a fondness for him, but he still could not seek to remember him at all! Was he perhaps a servant whom he had known as a child?

"Please good sir, rest assured you shall not be harmed any further for whatever you have been sentenced for. And if I ever dealt cruelly with you in the past I do apologize." Westan said quietly.

The prisoner looked extremely surprised by his words, and his large brown eyes immediately betrayed a deep concern.

"My King you need not apologize, *you* have done nothing to injure me!" He assured.

Westan was in shock. Just who was this man and what was he doing down here?

"Then tell me who you are! I cannot be put at ease until I know your name!" He shouted.

The man sighed and shook his head with defeat. Then after a long moment he spoke up again.

"Very well. Although I fear you will *not* be put at ease." He said.

Westan frowned. How could he possibly know that?

"Do not worry; I swear that you have nothing to fear by giving me your name." He assured seriously.

The man smiled slightly. "Well, my name is sure to be an easy one for you, since it is the same as yours."

Westan was confused for a moment. A name the same as his? Did he mean *Westan*? But that was actually his Uncle's namesake and had been chosen by his father at birth, and over the years he had never known anyone else to have that name, especially not a servant! Yet this dirty prisoner, he *also* had that name? But how could that be?

Westan suddenly gasped and quickly backed away from the cell. He examined the man from head to toe, finally recognizing his familiar brown eyes and warm smile.

"It, it cannot be!" He whispered with disbelief.

Westan shook his head, thoroughly confused. There was no way this man was his uncle! How could it be that he was still alive!? As much as he wanted it to be true, Zaccheus simply would not have allowed it to happen!

"No! Zaccheus said that he made sure my uncle was executed after my parents' death! It cannot be possible!" He shouted with growing confusion.

The man suddenly sank to his knees and bowed with his face on the ground.

"I know how you must view me Westan, but please let me explain myself! It was not I who killed your parents! Never would I have harmed my brother, or your mother! I have been framed for this crime! Please forgive me!" He said with a pained voice.

Westan felt his heart ache and stepped closer once more. Could he really believe what he was hearing? Perhaps this man was just pretending to be his uncle! But why would he do that? After all his uncle had been labeled a traitor and was thought to be executed years ago.

"I know my uncle did not kill my parents, Zacheus did! But how can I believe that *you* are claiming to be my uncle and living down here all along when I heard that he had been executed so many years ago? I simply cannot believe it!" Westan said with despair.

The man suddenly looked up with surprise, and smiled slowly. Then before anyone had time to react, he reached through the bars and grabbed his shoulders, gazing at him with eyes brightened by hope. Westan had to stop his men from attacking.

"So you are finally free of that deceitful man? Ever since that day I feared for your safety! How wonderful it is to hear such news at long last!" He said with tears rolling down his cheeks.

Westan felt like his whole world had fallen apart these last few days. Everything he thought he knew kept fading away, replaced with something entirely new and different. Now he was standing here with a man whom he now knew could be none other than his uncle!

Westan suddenly felt a happiness stronger than any he had ever known fighting to overwhelm him. The guilt he felt also seemed to lift off his heart like a lead weight.

"Let him out, NOW!" Westan commanded, no longer having any doubt.

"A-Are you sure my Lord?" Garret asked hesitantly.

Westan smiled, so excited that he could hardly contain himself.

"Yes, this man *is* my uncle and he *is* an innocent man! So let him out already!" He shouted with joy.

His uncle remained silent as a guard came in, took off his shackles, and brought him out of the cell. Then he rushed over and wrapped his arms around Westan gently, resting his own head upon his. Garret looked extremely uncomfortable by such a move, but he held back his men and himself again, although Westan could tell it took a great deal of effort.

"Never did I think I would hold you again! What a wonderful day!" His uncle whispered.

Westan's cheeks went red and he suddenly felt many emotions fighting to overwhelm him again. He wanted to laugh, to cry, and to curse all at once. He was happy to see that his uncle was alive, so angry at Zaccheus for all the terrible things he had done, and so upset with himself for allowing such things to happen!

"Uncle, I am so sorry! Please forgive me, I know this is all my fault!" Westan said with tears, feeling like he could never even begin to apologize.

His uncle pulled himself away to look at him with warm and understanding eyes.

"Do not be sad Westan. Zaccheus is the one who has done this to me, not you. I am just grateful that you have finally been able to break away from his grasp! I am so proud of you, and your father would be too." He said gently.

Westan was surprised that his uncle was in no way angry with him. He certainly did not feel that he deserved such praise or forgiveness.

"But I should have figured him out sooner! I should have known better than to trust him..." Westan said with shame.

His uncle smiled and patted his head like he was a small child.

"You were young and vulnerable, Zaccheus knew that well. You could not have known what he was, nor could you have stopped him even if you had." He assured seriously.

His uncle's words comforted Westan like no others could. He felt so relieved and strong now. So free of guilt and regret! It was all so amazing. He couldn't believe that Zaccheus had been captured and that his uncle was still alive! It all just felt too good to be true.

When Westan pulled away he noticed his uncle's appearance again. He was filthy, half starved, and very weary looking. It must have felt like an eternity for him down here.

"Come, let me get you out of here!" Westan said, trying not to dwell on any more painful thoughts.

His uncle smiled. "Indeed, I would be most grateful."

Garret did not look completely pleased about this situation, but he made no arguments as he led them all back up to the castle. Westan didn't pay much attention to him though. His one and only uncle was alive and well! Nothing at that moment could dampen his joy or hope for the future. Anything was surely possible now.

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To be Continued in Part 2!

(Keep reading below for a full sneak peek!)

Lila succeeded in saving the innocent men Bartholomew and Mr. Jameson from an unjust execution, but will such sacrifice end up costing her the one thing she cherishes most in life? And what are these sudden charges against her?

Meanwhile, Gam sues for peace with Chivele, but an unwanted arranged marriage may be the only means by which to do so. Can King Westan keep it together long enough for peace to be made, or will he end up failing his kingdom and letting down all those he has come to care for?

Thank you so much for reading! I really hope you enjoyed it! If you did, please leave me a positive review at your favorite retailer! And keep reading for a sneak peek at the upcoming sequel!

Thanks!

C.J. Young

About the Author

Hello! My name is Jessica. A little bit about me? Well I'm artistic in many ways: writing, drawing, painting, and crafting. I also love to watch anime, read manga, and bake sweets! Oh, I also seem to have a knack for winning stuffed animals from claw machines.

I currently live at home with my mother, my two younger sisters, and my disabled younger brother. I work a job to help support them all, and follow up my passion of writing in my free time.

I started writing a few years ago just as a hobby. At first I couldn't figure out a lot of plot points, so I often just worked on it lightly. But the more I developed each story and character, the stronger my need to write more often became. This is the first story I became seriously determined to finish and publish. It has been a long process, but I am very happy with my final product and proud that I was able to see it through to the end.

I have many other books in the works, including the sequel to A Kind of Beauty and the Beast Story. So please keep up with my Facebook for all future details! Thanks for your support!

Connect with Me!

Are you interested in sneak peeks and details for the upcoming sequel? Would you like to see some original artwork for my characters? Or what about trying to win a spot as an actual side character in the next book? Then connect with me for updates and unique details! (Links below)

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Sneak Peek!

"*I am sure this news does not please you Westan.*" His uncle's note read.

It was true, Westan defiantly was not pleased to find out that the only way to make peace with the King of Chivele was for him to agree to an arranged marriage! Why of all things did it have to be that?

"*But please, do not panic or feel pressured.*" The note read on.

"*As your uncle of course I want you to be a good King, but I also want you to be happy. I want you to think about this and decide for yourself what to do. I will not tell you what I want you to do, or what I would do in your place. You must be the one to make your own choices. I trust you will do what feels right to you.*" And that was the end of his uncle's letter.

"Hmm, an arranged marriage is not a bad idea. That would certainly secure peace better than a mere treaty." Garret said, mauling the information over in his head.

Westan crumpled up the note and threw it to the ground.

"No, that is a horrible idea! How can anyone expect two people to marry one another when they do not even know each other?" He snapped.

The man looked at him with serious eyes. "Sometimes it is the only way. Besides, peace is usually thought of as more important than a few people's preferences."

Westan's face blush scarlet red. How dare this man talk like he understood any of it! It wasn't like *he* was the one who would have to live

out the rest of his life with someone he had never met before! So what could Garret possibly know about this situation?

Westan quickly turned and stormed off in a rage, fearing he might do something rash otherwise. Not one servant or guard followed him, probably because everyone could see he was dangerously upset. He broke into a run, heading back up the garden entrance, down the hallway, up the staircases and straight back into his room. He slammed his door shut and locked it to make sure no one could come in. Then he threw open his curtains and tried to unlock the windows to his balcony. But after his last dangerous incident with the flag pole Garret had made sure they were secured shut until further notice, and Westan could not seem to make the locks budge at all. Eventually he gave up with a roar and flopped onto his bed in anger, feeling completely helpless and overwhelmed.

Why? Why an arranged marriage? Why was he being forced to marry some girl he had never even met before? All he wanted was to be a normal person! He just wanted to make friends and find love like everyone else did! Was it so much to ask? Was it too much to *wish*?

His uncle's words were still swimming through his mind. "*You must be the one to make your own choices, not anyone else.*"

So at least Westan *technically* had a choice. He could refuse the proposal. But then that would mean war for all his people with Chivele! More death and struggling and violence, and he certainly didn't want to be the cause of that!

So then, was he to be forced into this by his circumstances? Was there no way out of this situation? What was he to do with a wife he didn't even know? Were they really expected to live together and *have children*?

Such thoughts filled Westan with fear and apprehension. He wasn't ready for such responsibilities! He didn't want this fate! Why was being King so

unfair?

"Lila? Lila, are you quite alright?" She heard someone saying.

"Hmm?" She mumbled, still half asleep.

"Lila, I think perhaps we should escort you back to your room. It seems as though you need some rest." The voice said.

"No! I do not want to go back." Lila groaned as she roused a little.

Finally, she opened her eyes only to see Bartholomew leaning over her. His hand was on her shoulder as he gently nudged her awake, with his face only about a foot and a half away from her. From this distance his eyes were so blue and brilliant, his face so handsome and close to hers.

Lila blushed terribly and sat up, almost giving herself a head rush in the process.

"I-I apologize; I did not mean to startle you." He said.

"No, no, I just did not realize that I had fallen asleep. I am sorry, that put you in an awkward position." Lila said, still trying to calm her racing heart.

"I am better now. In fact, perhaps I will take a walk." She added.

"Very well, if you say you are up for the task. Where shall we go?" Mr. Jameson asked.

"Oh, I was thinking that I might just walk around by myself for a little. I will not go far." Lila said, ever so desperate to get away and clear her head.

"Well I suppose you may. We will not detain nor follow you uninvited."

He replied.

"No it is not that! I just need a few moments to collect my thoughts and wake up." She said politely.

"Of course then." Bartholomew said as he got up and walked a few paces away in the opposite direction.

Lila let out a sigh of relief as the two of them walked further away, giving her plenty of space. She hoped she had not hurt their feelings, but she just needed to be alone for a little while. So she began to explore her nearby surroundings.

The garden here was so lovely and well cared for. She wished there were as lush and grand places like this back home. After a moment she could no longer see Bartholomew or Mr. Jameson, so she decided it would be alright to explore a little further.

Lila slowly walked around the large tree and saw a couch on the other side. It looked expensive and quite comfortable, and probably belonged to the King. She was still a bit tired, but she dared not touch it.

Just then Lila saw something interesting that really caught her eye. It appeared to be a large bush full of beautiful blue roses. It was as tall as her house, and appeared to go on forever. Lila could not resist going over to investigate.

She had never seen roses in such a bright and vibrant color! They were so lovely and magical looking that they didn't even seem real! Carefully she picked a single rose off the bush. She inhaled its scent deeply, letting its wonderful aroma waft over her. It smelled so fresh, so sweet, and so unique.

It was then that Lila noticed there was something underneath the bushes leaves. She carefully moved them aside and saw a lovely marble wall which they had obviously grown over.

She walked along its side curiously, wondering just how far it went. After a moment she came to an entrance, with tall marble walls overgrown with rosebushes on either side of her. It almost looked like a hallway that lead to somewhere special.

What was this place?